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Deane Sperdakos
154 West 70th Street, #2D
New York, NY 10023
212-787-1840

ULTRAVIOLET

A Novel

by

Deane Sperdakos



This thesis consists of a full-length novel, entitled Ultraviolet, and an accompanying essay which represents an attempt to establish the novel within a context of recent literary trends, against the background of modern aesthetic theory.

The essay is divided into three major sections (a fourth section discusses the attached novel). The first part examined Ortega y Gasset's ideas on the "dehumanization" of modern art; this leads into a look at the nouveau roman in France and the essays of Alain Robbe-Grillet, its leading spokesman, who insisted on the freedom of the novelist to flout the conventions of the past and create new forms. It concludes with a few remarks on the predominance of form in modern art and literature, as opposed to the traditional concentration on the human content of the work. The essay thus seeks to demonstrate how one stream of fiction evolved, beginning with Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Beckett and others, from traditional nineteenth-century narrative structures to the current dehumanized aesthetic of form.

Ultraviolet, while not as radical as some of the antecedents discussed in the essay, was written in the same general spirit of iconoclasm, with emphasis on the formal elements of construction at the expense of the human material that forms its subject matter.

Cette thèse consiste en un roman intitulé Ultraviolet, et est accompagnée d'un essai représentant une tentative d'établir le roman dans le contexte des nouveaux courants de la littérature récente, sur le fond de la théorie esthétique moderne.

L'essai est divisé en trois sections principales (une quatrième discute le roman ci-joint). La première partie examine les idées de Ortega y Gasset sur la "déshumanisation" de l'art moderne; ceci nous amène à jeter un regard sur le nouveau roman en France et aux essais de Alain Robbe-Grillet, son principal porte-parole, qui insiste sur la liberté du romancier à faire fi des conventions du passé et à créer de nouvelles formes. Il se termine par quelques remarques sur la prédominance des formes dans l'art et la littérature moderne, par opposition à la traditionnelle concentration sur l'aspect humain des ouvrages. Cet essai tend à démontrer comment le courant de l'imagination a évolué, en commençant par Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Beckett et bien d'autres, de la construction descriptive traditionnelle du dix-neuvième siècle, à la courante esthétique des formes.

Ultraviolet, bien que n'étant pas aussi radical que certains de ceux précédemment discutés dans l'essai, fut écrit avec le même esprit général d'iconoclasme, et avec une emphase sur les éléments des formes de la construction, au détriment du thème humain qui forme le sujet de son contenu.

To fix this degree and the limits to the memory of the past, if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, we must see clearly how great is the "plastic power" of a man or a community or a culture; I mean the power of specifically growing out of one's self, of making the past and the strange one body with the near and the present, of healing wounds, replacing what is lost, repairing broken moulds. There are men who have this power so slightly that a single sharp experience, a single pain, often a little injustice, will lacerate their souls like the scratch of a poisoned knife. There are others, who are so little injured by the worst misfortunes, and even by their own spiteful actions, as to feel tolerably comfortable, with a fairly quiet conscience, in the midst of them,--or at any rate shortly afterwards. The deeper the roots of a man's inner nature, the better will he take the past into himself; and the greatest and most powerful nature would be known by the absence of limits for the historical sense to overgrow and work harm. It would assimilate and digest the past, however foreign, and turn it to sap.

--Nietzsche, The Use and Abuse of History

History, history! We fools, what do we know or care?
History begins for us with murder and enslavement, not
with discovery.

--William Carlos Williams

all history's a winter sport or three:
but were it five, i'd still insist that all
history is too small for even me;
for me and you, exceedingly too small:

--e.e. cummings

Into a savage color he went on.

--Wallace Stevens

PROLOGUE:

Recipe for an Interior City¹

Je sortis dans la ville sans fin. O fatigue!
Noyé dans la nuit sourde et dans la fuite de
bonheur. C'était comme une nuit d'hiver, avec
une neige pour étouffer le monde décidément.
--Rimbaud

Begin with a mountain. In this light (there is none)
it is only a father, a dense clump of black fatherhood. On
one side, near the top, facing east, illuminate a cross.
This cross consists of cables and wires and flat strips of
steel, skeletal and insubstantial, a mere frame for the lights,
rising to a height of one or two storeys. Ultimately, it is
only lights, a constellation in the shape of a cross. It
faces east, toward the homelands of the founders. It declares
itself a gaudy text, a thing to be construed. To some, in
touch with the tradition of the founders, it may represent
liberty; to others, without ancestors, it may signify death.
This is the mystique of the symbol: it is both death and the
freedom from death. The mountain is a father because it is
always there, it is dark and unknowable, it is the final
point of reference.

The city is a port, situated on a great river that has
always fed it. It is a city of churches and banks, infatuated
with its own past and worried about a future that may be de-
ficient in memory. Je me souviens: a cry of desperation.

More than other cities, this is a city of the imagination.

What strikes the visitor most forcibly is the confluence
of language. There is the language of the founders, who
parcelled out the land and built churches like châteaux to

pin it down, and there is the language of the conquerors, who appropriated the prior demarcations and the slender, curving streets and erected banks. Everywhere in the world this scenario of a process is known as history; history is what happened before living memory, milk spilt so long ago that it has evaporated. In this city of souvenir (m.) and memoire (f.) the process is not perceived within this context; it is apprehended in the singular language of the city as a species of betrayal, deprivation, viol. Here there is no distinction between history and memory: everything that happens or has happened is equally alive. Nothing ever evaporates or dissolves. It is concentrated (as it is everywhere) in the mother and father, the river and mountain, the worship and commerce, the English and French of the island city of Montreal.

Louis Riel, the father of French nationalism in Canada, was educated at Collège du Montréal. He was hanged in Regina on 15 November 1885. As the only mythically gigantic figure in the history of Canada, he partakes of the imagination of heroism. In a country memorable for its consistent lack of official defiance, Riel, whose primary mode of existence, even in madness, was to defy, occupies a crypto-satanic position in Canadian history. He is the will to freedom exorcised in death. He is the half-breed Christ of self-affirmation.

After two battles, at Fish Creek and Batoche, Riel surrendered. Accused of treason, he was unrepentent. Because he was now being forced to believe in his own death, he talked of freedom. This is the way of fallen angels, as Milton demonstrates.

The jury was not impressed. The people of Quebec, on the other hand, proclaimed the justice of his cause (which was their cause also) and denounced the government. Laurier defended Riel in a speech he gave in Champ de Mars. MacDonald declared that Riel should hang, "though every dog in Quebec bark in his favor."

So if there live in Montreal an historian who has given a portion of his life (a small portion, admittedly) to investigating the evolution of the city, he is merely, as he would surely acknowledge, encountering his own memory. His subject is himself: his relation to the abstractions formalized in the sibling concepts of independence (exemption) and expiration (dissolution). Insofar as he himself is not an abstraction, he must perforce be bound, perhaps even trivialized, by the emotional nexus contained in the state defined by the word desire. In an effort to transcend this nexus, to aspire to seriousness (and to avoid the trap of passion), he must project the terms of his desire onto its object. He must, in other words, see the world as himself and himself as the world (by world he means city), and proceed from that identity to a conclusion that is in the nature of revelation--demystification. His object is not to discover (objective) but to become (subjective); he must become isomorphic with his memory. This, at least, is how he conceives of it. It is all a matter of correspondences.

Des rêves suivants,--ses amours!--qui lui vinrent dans les lits ou dans les rues, et de leur suite et de leur fin, de douces considérations religieuses se dégagent peut-être.

The city of Montreal, roughly triangular in shape, sits in the St. Lawrence, a stone in the stream. Its streets are laid out--have happened--organically, rippling outward from the original town by the river to enclose and advance far beyond the mountain. It is neither English nor French, in the European sense, nor Canadian. Its sensibility belongs to no country; it is a place unique, a national phantom. It denies the legitimacy of any place else; the rest of the world is foreign and barbarous, as it was to the Greek city-states. Where Peel Street crosses St. Catherine is the world's navel; the rest is undiscoverable.

Streets are corridors: in the city one is never "outside." It is not contained by wilderness but contains a wilderness of its own: its mountain heart. It is here that the historian goes to confront his appetite, just off the westernmost of the three peaks, where he lives.

Cette fois, c'est la Femme qui j'ai vue dans la Ville,
et à qui j'ai parlé et qui me parle.

The city is a building, like himself. It is also a city of women.

She stands immobile, the brush in her right hand pointing at the floor. Behind her, her hair falls in a straight mass to her waist. She sees a man come out of a doorway across the street, carrying what appears to be a bag of groceries. He hurries in her direction with his collar up and his face buried in the lapels of his coat. The last thing she sees is the top of his head as he passes beneath her. When he is gone, there remains the oblique line of his footprints in the snow, a straight vector from the doorway of the store to an invisible spot beneath her window.

Alors, la femme disparut.

There is only the city and nothing else. There is nothing beyond the city. The mountain is a sun, a hole, a vast amorphous night. It contains its own negation, a sum of qualities, its own bizarre souffrance. She has not returned and will never return. She remains frozen in a tableau, off to one side by a window. The mountain and the streets are white with snow. In the room there is no motion, except the slight expansion and contraction of her chest and the barely perceptible flaring of her nostrils.

I.

Infrared

The statue in front of the building has already been boarded-over for the winter. Its fountains are quiescent. Or are there fountains? He cannot tell, looking through the window of the second floor men's room. Beyond the hutted statue (there are three figures under the boards, he remembers that) the road declines to the street, flanked on one side by an open lawn and on the other by a muddy playing field. Further down the hill the cruciform tower of Place Ville Marie is laterally bifurcated by an orange slab of later afternoon light. It is September, 1976: early autumn, the worst of seasons.

William Herold is approaching that age: un certain age, indeterminately old, past the prime, and so on. And it is approaching him, quietly and without fuss. He is two years past fifty but he hasn't caught up to it yet. He figures he will be fifty-five before the idea of being fifty sinks in, just as he was twenty-five before he realized he was twenty, thirty-five before thirty hit him. He has always been five years behind the clock. He won't die until he is five years dead already, impervious to the sudden adrenal nausea of surprise.

Each nation, as it achieves ascendancy, believes itself to be the sole and righteous defender of civilization, the anointed bastion of all that is good, true and lasting against the restive, predatory spasms of insolent and aggressive neighbors. Herold imagines himself a nation on the rise.

The interplay between macro and micro, he explained to Tim Andrews, a fellow professor of history. Man the measure, and all that.

Andrews polished his glasses. Unbespectacled, his eyes were seen to be too close together, small and ratlike, functionally inoperative, dull prisms stuck into his face like unappetizing marzipan.

Excuse me while I take a leak, Herold said.

He liked the view from the second floor, the clustered old-meets-new facade of downtown Montreal. And he has his demons, of course, to take into consideration. He lives in the belly of a horse, sagging through the tedium of years, wondering when the Trojans will finally get the idea.

William Herold is given to summations, reinterpretations, the periodic taking of stock. He likes to give his life a symmetry, a structural precision. Loose ends and random deviations are to be absorbed in the dense fabric of existence and similar banal metaphors of cohesion. So here he is,

compactly nutshellled, pissing away the three beers he drank with lunch (Molson golden, ha ha, a typical Andrewsism), the last civilized man shaking between two delicate fingers the cornerstone of human aspiration.

Teaching history is full of arcane gratifications, unsuspected by the layman, he says in a mute self-interview (another chapter in an already prolix series). This is what your readers want to hear, no? The inside dope, the verification of their surmises about attached strings, special effects and off-screen, illusionistic manipulations. The imparting of pattern to unformed minds, the glorification of an artifice, a fabrication, a bolstering of objectless faith. Yes, of course, there's always a fascination with personality. "What was Alexander really like, Professor? What's the story on his gay lifestyle? Hephaestion was more his type than Roxanne, eh?". One deals with such questions on a daily basis. You offer superstructure, they want infrastructure. You offer interstices of megameaning, they want personality. Reductio ad venustatem: it's all glamour. And it is obviously an insignificant thing to pretend to intellect. This isn't France, after all. I certainly don't do this for the prestige. In fact, if you must insist on the truth, I entered this profession out of pure indolence. But what you really want to know about

is my wife. How's her cooking? What have we been up to for the last two decades? I warn you that statistics will not be forthcoming. Just because we have no children doesn't mean we don't touch torch to kindling, so to speak. And yet her dissatisfaction grows. Well, I predicted that. It's an obvious sort of evolution. I don't want to get too confessional about it. But.

But what? Catherine is a fading tapestry. Her colors blur. The composite weave of her life lacks clarity where he touches it. She is a presence, impressionistic and vague, that he has absorbed. When she laughs, it is always a giggle, an exhibition. When she makes love, it is the manifestation of a will to dizziness, a getting lost in abstruse sensory otherness, a trip to the moon.

There is a football game in progress on the right quadrangle. The players stand with their hands on their hips, puffing and gasping, then run at each other, their T-shirts torn or discarded altogether, their vociferous banter audible even through the closed window. Herold is not a lover of sports, of deliberate self-induced weariness in pursuit of chimerical goals. Certain trees around the perimeter of the playing field mark tristing spots, occupied by a succession of necking couples. Place Ville Marie is going grey as the sun sinks. Herold

invents metaphors. The stars move away from each other, reflecting the red end of the spectrum as the distances between them increase. (An application of macro to micro, and so on.) There is nothing there. It is impossible to determine, finally, which flees from which. They flee from each other, according to science, as dictated by implacable laws, galaxy from galaxy, Herold from Herold, the world from each. I am depressing myself, he thinks. I am tipsy from lunch and from sipping brandy thoughtlessly in my office. I am bloated and do not much resemble what I think I look like. He turns to the mirror (a timeless turn, a re-enactment), observing puffy cheeks and flesh-blinkered eyes. A distended abdomen. His rings are too tight for his fingers, as well. My God! And what of the horror implicit in the epistemology of mirrors? He knows that he parts his hair on the left but he has only seen it parted on the right. Unrectifiable distortions equal tragedy, the big T of the H.C. (where H.C. equals Human Condition). Eh, Bill? To believe a fabrication, perforce, trapped in a sensory, quasi-existent nightmare.

There's more, he goes on. There's her nasty little habit of scratching her head and then sniffing her fingers, as if to inhale the sticky dandruff from beneath her nails. There's the way she can't cross her legs without twiddling her foot. (These things don't really bother me.) There's the overabundance of ice cream in the freezer that has made my rings too tight. There's Riel dangling from the gibbet, his crotch thickening. There's the weather that won't leave me alone, tyrannizing my moods. There's the fact that I've suddenly begun to snore for the first time in my life, for God's sake. There's the smell in my shoes that won't go away. Need the litany continue?

(She passes the brush through her wet hair, which she is holding firmly at the back of her head. Water falls down her back, each droplet distinct with its attendant wake. The hair, when she lets it fall, touches her waist, the matted ends curling into tiny hooks.)

It is almost dark. Herold has been prepared to flee the washroom as soon as anyone else enters it, but no one has. He can clearly see the lighted windows in the buildings downtown, alive in the dusk: the flat white squares of Place Ville Marie, the protuberant half-moons

of the Chateau Champlain. He combs back his hair with a little water and adjusts his tie (a blue stripe from Christian Dior). He tucks his shirt around his assertive, curvilinear waist, poking an index finger into each flank and watching the nails and knuckles disappear into the anarchic flesh. The last civilized man, overfed, petulant and curious about despair, is clearly too substantial.

The Hanged Man

Catherine Herold tells her husband she is leaving him. It is Tuesday, a typical evening in the living room of their house on Grosvenor Avenue. A Haydn symphony is on the stereo, Number 101 in D Major ("Clock"), and they are drinking cognac, Rémy Martin V.S.O.P. (maison fondée en 1724, as Herold has more than once observed). Outside, an occasional passing car splashes through a puddle on the street, which is still wet from the afternoon rain.

He was down in Champ de Mars today. It's the perfect place for a public execution. Does she know, in the summer of 1833 they hanged a man there for killing his wife with an ax.

She supposes his students enjoy such stories.

They do.

He pours the full contents of his glass into his mouth, the flesh on his neck quivering with the swallow, then measures out another drink. In the morning he teaches Canadian history; in the afternoon, Ancient Cultures and Civilizations.

His name was Adolphus Dewey.

Whose?

The man they hanged in 1833.

She has been looking out the window, watching the lugubrious swaying of the wet trees. Now she turns to, face her husband. He is looking at the floor, at a spot on the oriental rug where the threads have been exposed by wear. She looks there, too, where the secrets of the weave are revealed.

She made her announcement at dinner. He said nothing, carefully trimming the edge of fat from his porkchop. She is glad, in a way. Her reasons are vague; justification would have been difficult; she would have squirmed. He might have insisted, pinned her down, assailed her with logic and demanded a response in kind. Perhaps he realizes that any such argument would decompose into irrationality. He would have to fall back on hurt expressions, a wounded appeal for compassion, a disclosure of sudden emptiness. And she would have to strike him down with an implacable je m'en fiche: I don't care. Je n'suis pas contenté was enough. In any case, he said nothing.

She raises her eyes to his hair: somewhat long, not particularly neat, definitely too thick in the back.

He gets more grey every day.

Is she listening to him?

Yes, yes. Why did he do it?

Who?

This Dewey character. Why did he kill his wife?

Nobody knows. Apparently she was the epitome of gentility.

Did he get a big turnout?

Oh, yes. Made a speech and everything. All about the vanity of life and the mercy of God and all that. The place was packed. You could probably still fill Champ de Mars with a public execution.

She can't believe he went out in the rain.

Field research. The reek of authenticity. Might be a book in it.

(The observer, the specimen hunter, the uninvolved: these are epithets he applies to himself with satisfaction. He will be alone for a while, that's all. But he is awed.)

What will she be doing tomorrow?

She is supposed to play tennis with Cynthia.

How is Cynthia, by the way? Last time he saw her she was in pretty bad shape.

She's much better. Almost a new person.

She's starting to look like a new person herself. How much has she lost now?

Twenty pounds or so. She doesn't know, she's not trying.

An inexplicable loss of appetite, eh?

Not really..

(She shivers in the after-rain draught from the window. The Haydn symphony has reached its boisterous conclusion and now ~~everything~~ is still except Herold's eyes, wavering in their sockets, and his fingers, beating time against the glass in his lap.)

That taxi's taking its time getting here. Diamond, is it?

LaSalle.

Sure she doesn't want to change her mind? Go out to a show instead? Grab some dessert maybe?

No. (This comes out almost inarticulate, a preliterate, womb-learnt denial.)

No, she's not sure?

No, she's not hungry.

At some point the phone rings. It is impossible to say exactly when this happens or how many times it rings before they notice it. It does not shatter the silence in the room in any of the usual ways. The silence itself is an extended lacuna. In effect, between the last word spoken and the first ring of the phone there is nothing, a suspension of articulation that could last a fraction of a second or several minutes.

Herold reaches over and picks up the receiver. A woman (or girl) on the other end of the line identifies herself as Joanne Harrington, a student in one of his classes. She has called to request an extension on a term paper, which Herold grants.

While she is talking, Herold is conscious of her voice seeping into him. It lodges there, not as a series of words but as a texture. Perhaps because it is not a voice he has heard often, he finds himself mildly excited by it, although this may be no more than the natural result of speaking to an invisible stranger who nevertheless exists as a vague outline in his mind. What strikes him is the facility with which she has caused him to move from one mental (and physical) state to another, transferring him between realities.

Who was that?

One of his students. It's nothing.

Alright. She has made arrangements with Cynthia and Peter to put her up in their spare room for a couple of weeks.

She reaches over with one hand and closes the window. Now the silence is more definitive.

Herold retracts his arm to its former position, the elbow resting on the arm of the chair, the hand touching the glass between his thighs. Although his body is now in a position outwardly identical to the one it held before the phone rang, it feels twisted and uncomfortable, as if the muscles, having stretched out, cannot be restored to their former relaxed state without preliminary flexing.

That's kind of them.

They're like that.

Happiness is one of those things, he decides, cooed in its own conceptualness, to shake one's head at. So Catherine, too, is of a certain age; that is becoming apparent. She is thin now, a little round-shouldered. The fine line of her mouth is a little finer. Her fingers are stiff: but they have always been stiff, that's how they are. And she always had those shifting eyes, which give the impression that she isn't telling the whole story. Ever. The red end of the spectrum again, that goes unnoticed. The days of snuggle and coo are obviously lost to history, disengaged from here and hereafter.

The Nymphs

William Herold walks along Westmount Avenue and inhales the season: the unfamiliar rawness of late September. Wisps of cloud dilute the pale blue sky behind a lattice of unleaved branches. He stops in front of Collège Marguerite Bourgeois and watches an old nun negotiate her way along the drive. Her approach has the appearance of drunkenness or uncertainty; she is carefully avoiding the potholes that are still filled with water from the previous day's rain.

Godd afternoon, sister.

Bonjour, monsieur.

He walks for pleasure; this is obvious from the expression on his face and the disposition of his head. He does not look down at the pavement with his features fixed in a grimace; he looks at the buildings on either side of the street in turn, as if studying their architecture. He seems to be examining their objectivity, his mind otherwise blank. Nothing in his deportment suggests preoccupation, but his mind is not blank. At this moment he is experiencing a pedantic satisfaction. He is tempted to explain to the nun (his characteristic mode of self-expression is explanation) some of the history of the institution to which she is attached: that it was originally on St. Paul Street, at the end of

St. Dizier in the old part of the city, home to les filles du roi, one thousand of whom (in the official reckoning) came over between 1665 and 1673 to marry the colonists of New France. The word fille can mean either girl, maid, daughter, sister (nun) or whore. The nun is already hurrying away, the edge of her habit (or is it the wind) stirring the fallen leaves on the sidewalk.

He walks toward Villa Maria, which had once been a hotel and, before that, the vice-regal residence. Now it is a school for girls.


It was spring, five months ago. The streets were wet with slush and drainage from the melting snow banks and the humid wind was tart with distinctive smells of the season: thawing animal excrement that had lain frozen all winter, mud, sodden tree bark, last year's grass. The young girls exited their school with considerable liveliness, anticipating, Herold assumed, the tongues of their would-be lovers. They wore tunics and tied the arms of their sweaters around their waists.

Herold sniffs the air but can smell nothing. The girls of autumn are languorous, more trudging, slanting their bodies against the wind which blows back their hair and exposes the imperfections of their pock-marked temples, the scars of their childhood diseases. They are at the point

of acquiring a certain voluptuousness which does not discredit their innocence. They appeal to him primarily as artifacts: they are decorative but not yet titillating.

She is in her early twenties, perhaps five-foot-three, nicely fleshed out. Her height is all in her legs, which disguises the fact that she is not very tall. Her face is classically made, with high, angular cheekbones and full lips. Her hair is long and deep brown, almost reaching the small of her back. Her wide eyes gaze at him with innocent sincerity and beg him to pardon her dilatory scholarship. It is rumored that she is married to a man twice her age. Her complexion does not appear to be sallow, although it is difficult to tell because she applies her make-up so thickly in an effort to conceal her slightly pitted skin. Her eyes are nearly round and are clearly her best feature. She is in love with Alexander the Great.

Catherine Herold, née Laroche, has been in love twice that he can think of, maybe other times of which he is not aware, and perhaps even right now. The first time was with a medical student in the early fifties who studied in a seminary to take advantage of the free education. This was



in the country. At that time, her family owned a general store in a small village and realized enough profit from it to send Catherine, the youngest of three daughters, to study painting at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts in Montreal. Her mother, Clothilde, whose brother the bishop would later scandalize the town by being excommunicated for preaching the Apollinarian heresy of monophysitism, instigated this maneuver in the belief that it was impious of her daughter to accept the courtship of a seminarian, despite the fact that the suitor was under no obligation to take Holy Orders upon graduation. In Montreal Catherine lived with her eldest sister, who was married to a grocer. William Herold was at that time a graduate student in history. He remembers places: the bar of Drake's restaurant on the corner of Stanley and St. Catherine, the Cadillac Club on Peel Street, the Sportsman Bar on Mansfield and Burnside. He does not mourn the passing of these establishments, which, after all, he has outgrown, but he is sometimes affected by a certain nostalgia for days when he enjoyed the company of others. When the Mansfield Hotel, which housed the Sportsman in its basement, was torn down in the early seventies he felt a definite tickle of loss, for it was there that he first made love to his future wife.

Are you alright, Bill?

He tripped on the step. He's never seen a room where you have to climb two steps to get to the bathroom.

Is he sure he still wants to get married?

He thinks he's getting a bruise on his ankle.

They were married in 1955, in February, in a Catholic church, although Herold was an Anglican. Clothilde Laroche, who disapproved of her daughter marrying a non-Catholic, especially an anglais, stayed home, but Catherine's father attended. There was a small reception and no honeymoon, and there would have been no church either, but Catherine hoped to placate her mother's ill-will, which she failed to do, by having a traditional ceremony. When the time came for Herold to kiss the bride he was too flustered to think of it and had to be prompted by the priest. There was a photographer present, and flowers, and Catherine's two sisters were bridesmaids. In the picture of Catherine and William standing on the steps of the altar, which they had framed and placed on a table in their living room, Catherine is beaming into the camera while William, apparently distracted, is looking away. Actually, he was trying to turn his left semi-profile to the camera because he considered it his best side.

It begins to get dark earlier than Herold expected. He starts walking back home. He has made no adjustments to his schedule for his first night alone; first supper, then a little reading, then sleep. There will be no intrusion.

He reflects: autumn is not the season of suicides.

She has marks on her wrists, raised bands of scar tissue across the inner joint. She has a strange look in her eyes when he lectures on the Greeks, a kind of rapture directed not at him but at what he says. It makes a refreshing change from the more usual boredom and vacuity. He wonders what it is that appeals to her about the Greeks: their culture, philosophy, statuary, drama, government? Or is it their brutality, their tribalness, the imperial urge of Philip and Alexander? Alexander the conqueror or Alexander the civilizer? He himself, by his own estimation, is a civilized man, but his ability to arouse passion is distinctly and ever more obviously unmanifest.

Muffins

Standing on a chair, balanced on the toetips of one bare foot, the tendons of her leg straining against the skin, her other leg stretched out behind her at an angle of about thirty degrees (its foot pointing to one of the tiny stars on the linoleum floor), the high arch of her buttocks stretching the leather of her skirt, she reaches into the back of the cupboard. Thomas Albert Harrington, 38, LL.B. ('56), supports her with one hand on the soft crease behind her thigh and exerts a slight upward pressure.

She has a perfect ass, he tells her.

She turns and wraps her legs around his waist, encircling his neck with her arms. One hand holds a muffin tin behind his head.

Her legs are too short.

No, they're not. And besides, that has nothing to do with it.

She always wanted long legs. She always wanted to be tall.


She doesn't have to be.

She guesses she's no Lady Godiva.

She has nice tits, too.

He knows she hates that word.

That doesn't change anything.



He nuzzles one breast with his face. She holds his head close to her for a moment and then detaches herself from him. He is freshly shaven and smells of Brut. The left side of his chin is flecked with nicks. His upper lip overhangs the lower, coming to a point in the middle. She has always found this sexy, this bit of superfluous flesh that makes him look permanently bruised.

His muffins.

She doesn't have to do that.

She knows he likes them.

He likes her better.

He reaches for her but she backs away. This is a new instinct, a freshly acquired reaction: already he has passed into strangeness, into strangerhood. They were married for a year; they have been separated a month.

Don't, she says.

They aren't divorced.

Yet.

They may decide not to go through with it.

Joanne is twenty-two. Tom had been surprised to discover that he had married a virgin. She supposes he had been impressed. It was a question of fear rather than innocence. It was the first maidenhead he had ever encountered. He snapped it with a single punch, her "perfect ass" awash in blood, his grunts of satisfaction an audible smirk. But he had not been ungentle. She had always counted on his

patience. It ran out suddenly, an overdrawn account. He filed for a separation. She found it all very matter-of-fact, perfectly business-like. He told her she was too immature for him, that she was still young and hadn't really grown up into the marriage. It took him a year to realize it. Now he hints at reconciliation, shutting her out of the decision.

She doesn't want them to lose sight of her emotional age.

Do they really have to go through it all again?

No.

She has a way of pursing her lips in anger that she knows he hates, a withdrawal of the corners of her mouth that signals contempt. It is her answer, her sign of dismissal. It reduces him, defeats his equipoise. Diminished, he gropes for a weapon. That is her victory: to cause him to strike, to disrupt his control. It is a trick of finite utility; it can be learned, anticipated, adjusted to and, ultimately, countered with discipline. He knows how to catch his breath, quiet his heartbeat, retrench and begin again.

Sometimes she feels she's being victimized by his male menopause. Why doesn't he admit that he doesn't know what the hell to do?

What issue of Cosmopolitan did she learn that from?

She fills the pockets of the muffin tin with pleated paper muffin cups. She spoons batter into the cups, which she has arranged by color: blue on the left, pink on the right.

He doesn't think that was a very fair thing to say. It really hurts him to think that she could say something like that.

Joanne puts the filled tray into the oven and sets the dial.

She didn't preheat the oven.

Is he going to teach her how to make muffins now?

Evidently not.

He had been a tender educator, she admits that. They honeymooned in Greece. Greek men leered at her from cafes. Her clothes were too tight. She wore huge round sunglasses that obliterated her face. Tom held her hand but she did the leading. She dragged him to shops and agoras and to the beach twice a day. He said nothing, folding himself into her whims like a raisin into a cookie. She had a way of stopping to talk to strangers on the street, beggars, hippies, anyone with a musical instrument. At night in clubs she would make a point of getting into a conversation with the musicians, holding Tom by the hand while the Greeks tried to grind out a word or two of English, tried to make her understand with their eyes and their twisted grins that

they were able if she was willing. Later, Tom would be sweet in bed, lying next to her with a hand between her legs, trying to coax a response. She was nervous when they were alone. He tried to make her believe that he wasn't jealous but she could tell that he was by the formality of his approach. The sweetness was easily dissolved in fear: he was afraid of her, of what she might do to humiliate him. It had started already. But that was her, she was like that; it he didn't like it, too bad. Later she would learn to compromise but it was too late: he had already written her off.

Anyway, that was a mean thing to say.

Why don't they just forget it, okay?

She sits down at the table. The pollution in Athens had been incredible. He followed her around and let her do as she pleased. He loved her; it showed. Love was a sort of sublime confusion, a detachment from life. Life was a banal confusion, a bored bemusement. Love was a heightening of interest in a particularity; nothing changed but the focus.

Is he going to smoke that thing?

He looks at the cigarette in his hand which he has been drumming on the table for several minutes. It is

bent in the middle and about a quarter inch of tobacco has spilled out of it. He cracks a smile.

He guesses not.

Let her have one.

She started again?

She never stopped.

Oh, really? She told him she had quit.

Listen, are they going to be honest or not?

Of course they are. Haven't they always been?

He should tell her.

Let him light that for her.

She can do it.

Here.


He holds a match under the tip of her cigarette.

Leaning toward the flame with a little bow she shuts her eyes. For a moment she feels sympathetic toward him. She doesn't really feel like smoking. She hands him the cigarette. Leaning back, he exhales through his nose, self-contained. The moment dissipates in the rush of smoke and the acrid reality of burned sulfur. She becomes aware of the sweet smell of cooking batter: her gift.

Cemetary

Ancient history, to Joanne, was a series of resounding names; battles, places, peoples, mass migrations, the waxing and waning of cultures--together they comprised an exotic rhetoric that was bloodless, sweatless, clean and musical. To her, the continual struggle of different groups for the same land, spanning centuries, was a kind of theatre where the actors changed but not the roles; Elamites and Kassites and Sumerians gave way to Assyrians and Chaldeans and Medes, Cimmerians replaced Urartuans who had replaced Hunnites, Hittites yielded to Phrygians who yielded, in turn, to Lydians. There were names, like Anaximenes and Anaximander, that designated men she could barely imagine, who had evolved systems of thought she could not tell apart. Hyksos, Helios, helots, Helen: history was an epic poem.

The trees seem to go on for a long time, the path weaving among them. The ground is spotted by sunlight dribbling through the branches. She hears the flapping of invisible wings, the staccato cries of insects and the faint hum and hiss of distant traffic. Unconsciously, she squeezes the hand that is holding hers.



The sound of the Aegean: it sounded all blue water and white sand. The word itself sounded this way, although the place itself could never have been that way. It must have been another dirty ocean, filthy with the bilge of trieremes. But the eyes that looked over it were Alexander's.

He walks barefoot across the vast hall. By now he is used to the snakes his mother keeps in her room. She has just told him that the king is not his real father. He carries a pair of sandals in his left hand. He sees the opening at the end of the hall through a filter of hair. He was born in August, a Leo.

The path curves sharply to the right by a large tree. Tombstones on a hill are visible through crotches of thick branches. They vary in shape and height so that they appear to be a natural growth or a randomly assembled crowd of observers. Paul Bradley drops her hand and runs toward a tree. He jumps to catch the lowest of the branches and swings himself up onto it. His movement is swift and agile, so that from the moment his feet leave the ground and begin to arc upward toward the perch he becomes an extension of the landscape. He grins down at her.

Cheshire puss, she says, would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?

Is that a direct quote?

Verbatim.

She leans her back against the massive trunk and slides down into the short grass. Paul stands and reaches tentatively for a drooping branch just beyond his outstretched fingers. He gives up and sits down again.

It's probably not worth it anyway, he says.

How do you know I'm mad? Joanne says.

What?

Alice in Wonderland.

If she says so.

He jumps down and ~~lays~~ ^{lies} across her body, resting his head against her hip. Beyond his face she can see her crossed ankles and her shoes; one foot, the upper one, jiggles back and forth, dancing solo in an abstract rhythm.

Is she tired?

No.

Sure?

Let's walk.

She seems distracted. What is she thinking about?

Nothing.

Come on, he can see there's something.

She was thinking that Hannibal spent fifteen years in Italy and never attacked Rome. He marched up to it once, threw a spear at the wall and walked away.

He's sorry he asked.

The tombstones are laid out in neat groups separated by trees and hedges. Some of the graves are capped with obelisks; one boasts a carved angel on a pedestal. Some of the obelisks and tombstones have been knocked over by vandals, giving sections of the cemetery a ruined look. These sections seem less dignified, more pitiful, but somehow more grandiose.

They stop at a section near Côte-des-Neiges where the graves are all marked by identical stones and where there are no trees.

This is where they put the war heroes, Paul says. He wonders why.

They had to put them somewhere.

He wants to go back to the car. Does she want to drive up on the mountain?

They're on the mountain.

He means the other side.

She likes it better here.

She had been his first girlfriend, years ago. In high school he had not been popular. He had been too thin, bespectacled, kind of greasy looking. His skin had been bad, his teeth too prominent. He bloomed, eventually, but he was marked (this would have been obvious to her, in any case, even if he had not made a point--rather too much of a point, she thinks--of telling her himself): oversensitive, distrustful, full of fear. His father was autocratic, he said. His mother drank. He was weak and he knew it. He learned how to twist this into a semblance of vulnerability from which he could extract a portion of sexual power. It started with Joanne. They went to Mount Royal, the Westmount side where there were fewer people. He wasn't allowed to touch her. Ever elusive, she slipped through his hands. She knew how to lose herself, then, at least. She was always looking somewhere else, always unravelling some interior mystery. He was in love with her: her hair, her big eyes, her own unpopularity. She had a dog, a Great Dane named Pluto ("Like in the king of Hades?" "Like in Mickey Mouse."). He pursued her, the back of her head beyond his palm. She grew bored. They split up but he called her often. Eventually she married Tom, an older man. Paul forgot her without too much trouble (he has said so and she believes him). Now she is back, a discard, more sensitive and withdrawn. She always seems upset about something, as ever.

She's not depressed is she?

Of course not. What has she got to be depressed about?

He doesn't know. Why did she want to come here?

It's pretty.

Is that all?

For now.

It is pretty.

Come on, let's go.

They follow the winding road between large lots of graves. Soon the road becomes flanked by trees and the tombstones are farther apart and more ornate. There are statues and some fenced-in plots with gardens planted around the graves, and an occasional mausoleum.

He watches as his father is put to bed with his new bride. The old man is drunk. He hears a toast proposed: "to a legitimate heir." Enraged, he spins around and hurls his goblet in the direction of the offending voice. Philip rises and lurches toward him, brandishing his sword, but he is too drunk for such sudden movement and he falls.

They reach a point where the path they are on is crossed by another. Joanne gestures with her chin toward a group of young boys on the second path, walking away to their left. Three of the boys are walking together in front, engaged in an animated conversation. They are followed by another group of three, silently plodding after the leaders. Last comes a single boy, trudging along with his hands in his pockets, studying the ground and trotting a little every few paces in an effort to catch up with the others. Joanne stops and watches them until they are out of sight over a low rise.

Apparently his eyes are grey and liquid. She supposes that if he were to be photographed they would appear empty of color, vacant hallucinatory pools. It is rumored by memoirists that his breath is sweet. When he rides before the assembled phalanxes, his hair sweeps back in a wavy mane, exposing his ears.

They find her husband's car and drive along the narrow roads, without destination but continuously ascending. Paul opens the glove compartment; inside he finds two drawings of faces, done in charcoal. The faces are long and drawn and streaked with lines that are obviously intended to represent pain: mysterious torments embedded in the shortest distance between two points. The eyes are dry and dead-looking. The two pictures are almost identical; they

are apparently different representations of the same face experiencing the same despair, as if the life inhabiting the face is sensible of no other emotion.

Who drew these?

She did.

They remind him of El Greco's madmen.

Put them back, Paul.

Does she think she has any talent.

She doesn't want to talk about it.

He wonders what her husband thought. Was she trying to tell him something, leaving them in his car?

They are nearing the top of a hill. There are fewer alternate roads to choose from now and the land is undeveloped.

She saw him today, as a matter of fact.

Oh, really? Why? He means, what did he have to say?

She made him some muffins.

Is that all she did?

Of course.

They reach the crematorium at the top of the hill.

A large flower bed is in full bloom by the entrance. It is Indian summer.

They're doing well for so late in the season, Paul says.

Want to go in?

Not really.

Come on.

She gets out of the car and runs up the crematory steps. Paul follows her into a barren hall.

Not much action, he says.

She's changed her mind. She wants to go back.

At Tarsus he is ill from swimming in cold water. He takes the cup from his physician. As he is about to drink, he is informed that the man has orders to poison him. He hands the letter containing this intelligence to the physician and drinks. He suffers from diarrhoea for days thereafter.

Outside, the sun is very bright. Smoke drifts in thin wisps from the chimney of the building. Joanne gets into the car and starts the engine. Paul enters from the passenger side and hands her two roses.

What's that?

He picked them for her.

He stretches an arm along the back of her seat and tries to pull her closer. Her upper arm is fleshy beneath her thin sweater. She throws the roses through the window.

He is stunned. He becomes conscious of his arm, extended in a now embarrassing embrace. It is warm in the car and he can feel the sun on the back of his hand. The suddenness of her response has left him suspended, so that he is momentarily aware of every sensation, especially the heaviness in his chest. Joanne's hair has fallen forward over her shoulder so that only her nose can be seen; it is straight and small. In profile, the back of her head seems very round.

What did she do that for?

He didn't have to take two of them.

What's the matter with her?

One would have been enough. He didn't have to ruin two of them.

She didn't have to throw them both away.

Breughel

Paul Bradley keeps everything in perspective. He draws straight lines into the future that meet at the horizon. That is the moment of death, at the point of convergence. It is based on a kind of pun: vertical man, in a Christian sense, becoming horizontal man, in a non-Christian sense. He explains this to Alan Sansavar very carefully, pointing to the large print of Breughel's "Children's Games" that is taped to the wall above Alan's head.

Inspired by that picture, he says. Look at the street on the right. Just look at that depth. You've got the bustle and the activity in the foreground, diminishing as the street tapers off. That's the kind of metaphor I'm talking about.

There's a church at the end of the street. Is that what he means?

No, no, forget about that. Just think of it as a stone wall. A wall with a tower, if you like. Forget about Breughel. You're driving a car down a narrow street in the middle of the night, speeding, of course, you're mad about speed--you're bombing along and suddenly there's a wall there and there's no way you can stop.

What happens? Alan asks, with little interest.

You hit it, of course. You see it coming and you think--my God, I'm dead! You know you've had it. You close your eyes at the last second and wait for the impact. You hardly feel it. You just pass from darkness into darkness and the next thing you know you're dead.

Alan supposes there's more to it than that.

Not really. Not when you think about it.

With all due respect, it doesn't really seem worth thinking about.

Paul exhales with an exasperated hiss. It was just a dream he had.

Alan rolls a cigarette on a pocket machine. He is not neat about it, and when tobacco spills onto his jeans he brushes it to the floor.

There is a woman in a photograph, with a long face and a high forehead partly obscured by smoke from an out-of-frame cigarette. She is squinting slightly, so that the skin between her right eye and the beginning of the hair on the right side of her head (the only side visible) is wrinkled. Her hair is cut straight across at the back of her neck, with no attempt at style; the line of the cut continues around to the side of her head so that the hair

falls to about an inch below her ear. The line is straight only in a general way, with many uneven sections, as if she has cut it herself, quickly and without great care. In her raised left hand, filling the bottom right corner of the picture, she holds the hair she has cut off, a dense mass of delineated shadow (the photo is black and white) that seems to be about sixteen inches long. Her expression, which is rather ambiguous and difficult to describe accurately, is a mixture of triumph, defiance and abashment. What is most impressive about the picture is its iconographic composition: it is both definitive and arcane, like a Tarot card.

When Alan first came over from England to live with his sister (the woman in the photograph), her husband, and their five children, he did not plan to stay long. That was two years ago. His sister returned to England a year later, after her divorce, and Alan moved to a semi-basement near Carré St. Louis. He supported himself for a time dealing hash oil and LSD on St. Denis Street, where he was known as l'Anglais by most and as Alain by a few. One of these few, Jacques Chénard (Chénard le Chien, as he fancied himself), had also begun his adult life as an enterprising, if not too successful, dealer in illegal hallucinogens, branching out, as the times demanded, into

more lucrative narcotic substances. At one time Chénard had been a political science student at l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Abandoning his studies, he became an inspired radical in defense of the preservation of French Canadian cultural identity. Alan met him in the course of daily business in the St. Denis Street bistros. He did not find it unnatural that Jacques took to him, although he spoke French, as he did English, with a heavy British accent. He merely assumed that Jacques detected a social kinship between them that transcended language, for he himself was a kind of latter-day adherent of la révolution.

Throughout his months in the St. Denis district Alan heard references to a group called Le Front de la Lumière Noire, but the organization itself, to which Jacques apparently belonged, remained an abstraction. Its ideology, aims and methods were likewise only vaguely communicated to him and the impression he formed was that it was little more than a small group of dedicated Québécois whose purpose was to educate the people to some sort of undefined action.

According to Jacques Chénard, the group chose its name to signify that, like ultraviolet radiation, it was invisible but ubiquitous, could heal or destroy, and, like a black light, could illuminate a properly prepared substance,

i.e., the francophone populace. Alan, intrigued by such metaphoric extrapolations, tried to discuss it one afternoon with Jacques.

I suppose you could say that it represents the hidden spirit of the French Canadians in some way, Alan said. Or their demon of freedom, their essential élan.

Je suppose.

Alan sucked on a joint and handed it to Jacques.

This isn't very good stuff, Jacques said.

There are probably theological implications as well, when you think about it.

It's just a name. Like that.

Alan moved out of the district in May to take up residence in a rooming house off Dorchester, where he had been hired as a nightclerk. Paul worked the evening shift.

Sansavar. That sounds more Spanish than English.

It's French, actually. Probably comes from sans-avoir--have nothing. Apparently, I'm descended from impoverished Norman gentry, unless some ancestral serf adopted his master's name at some point. But then, a sans-avoir wouldn't have any serfs, would he?

And the accent?

Leicester-cum-Cambridge.

There is another photograph of the same woman, pinned to the wall above his bed, in which she is seen from the back right, sitting on the floor with her arms around her knees, her head cradled in the joint of her left arm and shoulder. Just beyond her bare feet is a small round ash-tray, of a type common in restaurants, with an indistinguishable word printed on its inner surface. One of its notches holds a lit cigarette from which rise thin plumes of smoke, the whole having the appearance of burning incense.

Alan wants to know if there are any matches.

Here.

Paul watches him put the flame to the end of the thin cigarette he has rolled. Alan's beard, long but not thick, almost oriental in its sparseness, is parted and forked under his chin.

He asks Paul how it is going with Joanne.

Okay. She took him to the cemetery this afternoon.

The cemetery? She sounds a little morbid.

Actually, she's thinking of moving in with him.

Really? He hadn't realized Paul had gotten that far.

She and Alan can go to funerals together.

Now, now, don't be nasty.

They pause to sip beer. It has gone warm. Paul stares at the Breughel.

You know, he says, that's really the only picture of his that I like.

Alan is privy to the bluntness of death. He knows it as a softening of edges, a slow slipping into indistinctness. It approaches in increments of advancing dullness, a greying of the senses. This is the effect on him of sleeping pills and aspirin, taken in conjunction for a total of approximately eighty capsules and tablets. The alleged motive is abandonment by a lover. Afterwards, memory begins again with an image of carpeting, worn and dirty blue, a heaving of the digestive tract accompanied by constricted breathing and some loss of hearing, a sickening ride in what must be a taxi, and Paul's voice answering questions that seem to refer to him.

Miro

If God had to do the flood over again, Herold says, he would not repeat the mistake of telling Noah about it in advance.

Tom Harrington sinks a two-foot putt for a bogey on the twelfth green at Laval-sur-la-Lac Country Club.

Well, you're up two, Tom, Chris Watson says. I suppose you want to press the bet.

First she takes a number of short steps, as if uncertain that she wishes to proceed (although there is no significance to what she is contemplating). Then she stops and stands motionless, her gaze directed at the glass coffee table through which the rust-colored carpet is visible. After several moments she reaches up and fastens her hair into a ponytail with an elastic. She has been walking, apparently aimlessly, from room to room for the past half hour. Her present stillness signals the end of her task: she has redefined the place to which she has just moved a few hours ago.

I thought you were the evangelist of civilization, Herold, McClough says.

I'm afraid I'm all out of good news.

He believes in an abstract perfection, Tim Andrews says.

Chris Watson wants to know how his affairs are progressing.

Well, you should be alright, Tom says. This guy Bergeron--not the old man, his son--he's the real prick you've got to watch out for. He's the one who's been giving you all the trouble. I've made some arrangements with the other directors, though, and they're willing to go along with you. Just one more die-hard on the board, not counting Bergeron junior, but I think we can swing him. The company will be in your pocket, say, this time two weeks from now. I've already got enough proxies tied up to ensure the vote. You don't have to worry about a thing. Just let ~~me~~ handle it.

Eventually, she drifts over to the large window overlooking the alley. In a sense, she is summoned by the shrieking of the children playing there, two storeys down, whom she cannot see from her present angle. The sky is overcast and everything is grey. She feels that she herself partakes of this greyness, as if she has been flattened out, subdued, perhaps nullified. She stares through the window, wishing it would snow.

Barbarism, brutality and bestiality are unalterable constants of human tribal existence, Herold says. Civilization just means we're more polite about our deprivations.

I see.

Civilization is an ornament, Herold says.

This guy Bergeron still bothers me. I don't see how you can get around him.

Let's face it, Chris, what does a Frenchman know about business?

She turns back to face the room. On the wall to the left is taped a print of Breughel's "Children's Games." Beyond that, a little lower on the wall so that its bottom edge is quite close to the lamp on the small end-table, is a mounted reproduction of Miro's "Woman in the Sun." Along the right-hand wall stand two bookcases and, between them, an unpainted credenza upon which rests a television. Above this is a small print of Picasso's "The Lovers." In order to exit the room, she must pass between these two walls and then turn left through an archway into the entrance area, which is partially blocked by a low chair and a telephone stand. As she executes this maneuver, her eyes remain fixed on a single point: the Miro on the left wall. Thus, as she walks her head gradually pivots leftward until she is directly in front of the picture. Only then, because of the position of the coffee table, can she realign her body with the angle of her vision. When she has completed this movement, she stops for a moment to study the picture before leaving the room.

I'm thinking of a girl, Herold says, drunk at last, who, as far as I can tell, is in love with Alexander the Great.

You're talking about the business of the future, Chris. In a few years, recycled anything will be worth money to the man doing the job. Right now you're in on the ground floor with paper. Sure it's still only a small piece of Empire State Pulp & Paper, but you'll have a chance in a couple of months to get a separate subsidiary going. Go to the bookstore sometime, Chris, look at the books. A hundred percent recycled paper. People don't want to throw anything away anymore. They want to reuse what they've got. This is going to be big for you.

Ever hear from her?

She ~~calls~~ calls me all the time, Herold says.

How's she making out?


She says she plays a lot of tennis.

Does she ever say anything definite? About coming back, I mean.

She says she loves me.

Isn't that a good sign? That she says she loves you, I mean?

Not really. We always say that.




(We should get together again next week for another round. Keep you in shape, Chris.

Are you kidding? I almost froze out there today. This place will be closed in a week or two.

I never quit until there's snow on the ground. That's how much I love golf.

The picture is almost completely blue, a very deep blue. The woman is a stick figure, a matter of a few black lines, with a round head, as in a drawing by a child. Above the woman, and on the same plane (there is no attempt at perspective), is an imprecisely drawn yellow ball.

The page contains two simple hand-drawn sketches. On the left side, there is a stick figure of a person, drawn with a few black lines. On the right side, there is a small, irregular yellow shape representing a ball.

Ardor

Joanne and Paul: a recrudescence. Reinflecting each other, they wonder what is different. Nothing is different: they become what they are. (If I knew then what I know now . . . they knew, and it made no difference.) Only the focus is clearer, less sepiated; they trick out the present to be similar to the past but better--a darkroom technique.

Joanne rises from the bed and lifts the window blind. Still-life on windowsill: a candle in an iron dish resting on two books (their spines facing the window and thus unreadable), a Malbec wine bottle containing an inch of liquid blackness and sediment, an African Violet potted in a plastic margarine container.

She hates the way the sun comes in in the morning, she tells him, pulling down the blind.

What is she talking about?

Nothing.

Talking to herself?

The sun's too bright.

She runs her nails across her scalp, peeling the tangles from her hair. The room is dusty and reeks of nightbreath and sleep. It smells of dirty linen. The air is soiled and thick with particles drifting in the sunlight that penetrates the tiny punctures in the blind.

Can't she see he's trying to sleep?

So?

So what did she wake him up for?

He sleeps too much.

She sits on the edge of the bed and picks at the damp clumps of flaked skin under her fingernails: scalp debris, dead cells, the afterbirth of the little pleasure that scratching affords." She is walking down a corridor lined with doors. Each door is slightly ajar but she is tempted by none of them. At the bottom of each door is the same elongated triangle of light and from beyond each emanates an identically pitched wave of snoring. It bothers her to see someone asleep when she is not.

She begins to get dressed, with a kind of persistent willfulness, as if performing a duty, a boring chore that must be suffered to completion. Tom has said that daily life weighs upon her, demanding too much attention to detail, an excess of devotion to the insignificant. Joanne knows (believes) that the mundane must be invested with meaning, but she lacks the self-deluding artificiality of the skilled interpolator.

☛ Come here, Paul says.

What?

Don't get up in such a hurry.

She wants to go to Steinberg's. They need some food.

Not yet.

He pulls her down. Energetically, he circumscribes her neck with a choker of kisses.

Is he looking for trouble?

Maybe.

He has a nipple cupped in the palm of each hand. He plays. He lacks high seriousness: the joke of sex.

I'm not virile enough for you? he says.

Sometimes they do it three times a day. Sometimes he times them: twenty minutes, half an hour--a sum of diminutive passions.

Strictly functional, she says. Astride him, she catches his penis between her labia and moves up and down. He presses his hands against her thighs to retard her motion.

You'll make me come, he says.

I'm trying to shut you up, she says.

Above the bed, another poster is taped: a Turner seascape depicting a ship caught in a storm. This picture is predominantly a study in yellow, more suggestive of a sandstorm than an ocean tempest. It matches the curtains that Joanne has by now drawn across the windows, covering the ineffective blinds with a kind of gauzy filter. Although the entire room is painted white, it appears to be a shade of pale orange, a projection of intangible color.

The day slips into a different tense. At four o'clock Paul must leave for work. He stands at the front door, the knob under his hand. Joanne is in the bedroom several feet away, so that they must raise their voices in order to be heard.

Okay, he's leaving.

Okay. Does he love her?

Okay, bye.

Did he hear what she said?

No, what?

She said does he love her.

Sure does.

Sure.

What does she mean sure?

She means she doesn't believe him.

What does she mean she doesn't believe him?

She means she doesn't.

Come on, eh.

She doesn't.

Come on.

Oh, alright. Bye.

Okay, bye.

The night slips into a different tense but the colors remain the same: the shade of the bedroom lamp is the same orange as the curtains. The bed has not been made; the sheets display a pattern of yellow flowers. Although the light is on there is no one in the room.

It is three o'clock in the morning.

Joanne is lying on the living room couch, her back propped up with cushions. She is reading The Shape of European History by Carl Gustavson. Paul is sitting by a table in the corner, trying to write a poem. He is staring intently at the keyboard of a small portable typewriter, his fingers poised in mid-air. On the wall above the table is a print by Chagall: a sheep's head.

The following conversation takes place against a barely audible musical background: a Joe Cocker album is playing on the stereo in the opposite corner of the room to where Paul is sitting. The volume is turned down very low. The record in question is Side One of Stingray; the songs that play, in order, are: "The Jealous Kind," "I Broke Down," "You Came Along," "Catfish," and "Moon Dew."

What's the matter, losing his touch?

Is that what she thinks?

What does he think?

He just can't think of anything poetic.

He's lost it, baby.

He just can't think of anything to say, that's all.

Where are those journals that published him before?

Right behind her. Second shelf.

These two here?

Right. (He starts to type.)

What did he get?

He's writing what she's doing. "She reaches with one arm/curved slightly in an oblique twist/and extracts two thin volumes from a densely packed row."

Exciting.

It's her life they're talking about here.

Who's the woman in this one?

No one special.

She's a little jealous of the women in his poems. Is she one of them?

No, he never wrote a poem about her. They're fiction.

She knows that but she wonders who they are sometimes.

He too.

She's reading someone else now.

She means someone else's poem?

Uh-huh.

Let him write that down.

Maybe they should live apart. That way she won't have to worry about what he's thinking.

He doesn't understand what she means.

He never answered her question that afternoon. It's been bothering her all day.

What question?

She hates to keep repeating it. She asked him if he loved her.

Yes.

She means, does he love her for her.

Yes, he does. Does that answer her question?

She means for her.

That answers the question for her?

She just wants to know if he loves her, that's all.

(There is a prolonged pause here, during which she continues to read through the two poetry journals and he stares fixedly at the typewriter. In fact, a close examination of his eyes would reveal that he is probably not concentrating on what he is doing, not, that is, trying to think of the next line of his poem. Rather, he appears to be daydreaming, or thinking of nothing at all, or lis-

tening intently to the music. When the record finishes, Joanne gets up and flips it over; Paul's expression does not change. The songs that now play are (again in order): "The Man in Me," "She is My Lady," "Worrier," "Born Thru Indifference," and "A Song for You." Joanne is definitely listening, for she is moving her body in time to the music. Between the first and second songs she resumes the conversation.)

She wonders if it's only physical.

What is?

She and he.

What kind of shit is that?

Sometimes she wonders, that's all.

Well, she should stop wondering.

Sometimes she thinks he just likes her for sex.

That's it alright. How did she figure it out?

She's serious.

He'll prove it to her.

She's serious, Paul.

He loves her, Joanne, you know what he means? How many times a day does he have to tell her?

Tell her.

He just told her.

Tell her again.

He loves her, goddamn it.

Tell her often.

Dancing

In the fall Cynthia Bradley always tries to do something different with her hair. The past year she has let it grow down just beyond her shoulders, curled outward in broad waves. Now she has cut it short, curving it inward under her jaw line, and cropped the front into straight bangs that fall to within a few centimeters of her eyebrows. She has also changed the color from a deep, woody brown to a lighter, reddish brown. The original color was almost black, but she started greying when she was twenty-five and has been dying it since she was twenty-eight. She doesn't do this for any particular reason, except that when she was younger she didn't want to look old and she has maintained the habit of simulating youth despite the fact that she no longer cares one way or the other. Thinking about it, she might say that it has something to do with the advent of cold weather, creeping under her skin and establishing a kind of seasonal permafrost there like a layer of fat. The skin itself has begun to stretch and her face is beginning to redden. She is able to discern fine cavities in her face where the pores have opened. She is not painful to look at (she finds) but she is far from striking. She herself thinks that many women her age (she is 46) are nearly beautiful, or appear to have once been

beautiful, whereas she gives the impression of having always been plain, although she was once nearly beautiful herself. She wonders about that word whenever she catches herself using it; it seems rather vague and lacking in definition but she is a little lazy about precision. In fact, she would just as soon not have to worry about coming to terms with anything in an exact or accurate manner. It is just too demanding. She prefers a kind of unconscious generalization, even concerning her appearance. It is enough that she looks reasonably feminine without being outright ugly, reasonably intelligent without having to strain to impress, and reasonably sane without putting too fine a point on it.

Now she sits before the mirror, with an abstracted look on her face, not gazing at her own reflection but off to one side, so that she appears to be watching the furniture: bed, nightstand, a section of dresser.

Cynthia married Peter Bradley when she was twenty-three and gave birth to Paul a year later. She was a very fussy and high-strung mother, hurrying to phone the pediatrician at the slightest pretext: a sniffle, a colic, a touch of rash. Paul was young Dr. Cohn's first patient and Cynthia was responsible for dozens of unnecessary

housecalls. Dr. Cohn answered each summons cheerfully, stoically undeterred even after the time Paul urinated in his face ("It's clean, he's only a baby." "It's just the idea," Cynthia answered.). When Paul was eight years old, Cynthia went into labor for a second time. The baby's name, if male, was to be David; if female, Lillian. David was born dead on a humid, windless afternoon in July. The after-effects, the years in and out of St. Jean de Dieu and other psychiatric holding pens, the constant drift and disintegration of focus, the specific, world-in-a-glance looks to which she was subjected, the patronizing manner of Peter and her friends--it seemed unreasonable, a violation, a deliberate recreation of her as victim. An extended nervous breakdown, what was wrong with that? The words were tame, conveying neither stigma nor serious dislocation. It was a mental flu, a psychic sniffle, nothing to get excited about. Yet her sanity had been questioned, her place in the world, her credibility, her right to be taken seriously. She was sentenced to helplessness, reduced, unsexed.

After eight years of raising Paul, she thought she had learned enough in the arcana of motherhood to bring up another child with greater efficiency, technical refinement and honed instinct. David (or Lillian) had the potential to be created with finer art, subject to less

haphazard development than Paul, who grew beyond her very quickly. Caught by surprise by each fresh nuance that Paul revealed, she had been able only to react and hope for the best. She was prepared for David/Lillian, knew what to expect. She was on top of things. She knew how to separate, how to diminish (herself not least), how to be alien.

Peter did not look for explanations. He shuffled Paul off to the Boy Scouts, sent him to a private school, tried to do his best. Paul was never a tractable child; discipline was beyond his imagination. As he grew older, Peter tried to keep him close to the family; Paul defended himself with selfishness.

Catherine Herold has entered Cynthia's immediate universe. They have known each other a long time, almost twenty years. But Cynthia has never been close to anyone, never had a confidante. Catherine is soft, mild. She speaks in a low voice, carefully measuring syllables. She lost her French accent years ago; it drifted away from her, a dispersing fog. Catherine told Cynthia that she had once asked her mother how it is possible that people speak so many different languages, how they can think in a foreign language. Catherine's mother told her that everyone thought in French but when they tried to speak it came out in the language of their fathers. This was the penalty and consequence of Babel: to be locked forever into an inescapable confusion of thought and expression, unable to speak direct-

ly in the language of the mind.

Catherine looks like she would be soft to touch. Her edges are rounded. A thin layer of fat and flesh conceals the bones of her shoulders, back, elbows, and hips. She has the appeal of a down mattress. Cynthia does not like to see her losing weight; thin, she is an aggression, a physical exclamation point. Her slenderness is a declaration of being. Cynthia prefers her to have a rounded inchoateness that suggests an ability to absorb, comfort and redeem. Cynthia has always been thin.

They play tennis. Catherine is too slow, her movements are awkward, her muscles don't cooperate with each other. They play indoors. Later, Cynthia will dream of the clear pocking sound the ball makes when it strikes her racket, of the dull thud of the ball hitting the floor. Her dreams will be studded with ball sounds, tiny invisible explosions that eventually shock her awake.

When they get back to Cynthia's house Peter asks them what they have been up to. Cynthia tells him in a dry voice. She is irritated by the demands of conversation.

How did it go? Peter asks.

She beat me into the ground, Catherine Herold says. With her shoelaces untied.

Peter laughs. His laugh is unstrained. He thinks it good that Cynthia is getting out, that she has a friend. He has reached the point where all he wants is to avoid friction. He wants the rest of his life to be a great, slow slide: smooth sailing. He hates the smell of sweat and rubber that the women bring into his house. Inexplicably, it puts him in a fine mood.

Don't make her too conceited, Cathy, he says.

Oh, you're funny, Cynthia says.

Peter is on his way out. His leaving reminds Cynthia of a large animal rumbling past, a relief that she has not been trampled, although Peter is only five-foot eleven and weighs only a hundred and eighty-five pounds. Presence is not contingent on size; it is a state. States of existence threaten to crush her. She finds it difficult to breathe.

Catherine, too, understands breathlessness. As a child she was asthmatic. At night in bed she would struggle to breathe, wrestling against the black weight sitting on her chest. She knew she would die. The affliction disappeared when she grew up, like the warts that had once covered the back of her left hand. She was told to rub the warts with the rind of an orange. They had been burnt off but they grew back. She tried the orange-peel cure, buffing the back of her hand with the white inner skin of the fruit. Three weeks into the treatment the warts were gone for good. Now she knows the value of superstition.

Let's have some lunch, she says.

No, I'm going to take a bath. You make something for yourself if you like.

I wasn't really that hungry. Maybe just some toast.

Cynthia unfastens the barrettes from her hair. It falls toward her face in an unnatural wave.

I know, she says. Let's go out tonight. The three of us. You should get out, Cathy, it'll do you good. No sense moping around here all the time. Let's go dancing or something.

I don't know, Cynthia, I don't feel much like it.

No, me neither. Let's just stay home and drag ass.

She tosses the barrettes onto the table and leaves the room.

Catherine looks out the window: the bare branches of the trees segment the sky. She goes to the telephone and dials a number; after ten rings she hangs up. She opens the refrigerator and stares at the shelves of food, neatly stored against the blue interior. After a while she starts to cry.

That night they go out and Catherine dances with Peter. They are at L'Escapade, in the Chateau Champlain. Peter holds her lightly but he is not a good dancer.

I'm worried about Cynthia, he says.

Give her a chance, she'll come around.

I hope so. It's driving me crazy. I ~~must~~ say, you've got a lot of strength. Another woman in your position might crack.

What's my position?

Don't get angry. I didn't mean anything. The remark was meant to show admiration. I'm impressed with your fortitude, that's all.

Fortitude? I'm visiting friends, that's all.

Of course. Forget I mentioned it.

They move around the floor in an almost irrational pattern. The music is bland and sentimental. Catherine finds it wears her down. Peter makes requests to the band but he doesn't listen when his songs are played.

Wasn't that fun? Cynthia says when they get home. Aren't you glad you decided to come?

I had a very nice time, Catherine says. Thank you very much, Mr. Bradley, she adds, with mock courtesy and a little bow, for a very entertaining evening.

My pleasure, Mrs. Herold, Peter says, bowing in turn. My services are always at your disposal.

Look at you two, Cynthia says. Like two dolls on a goddam clock.

The Devil

The end of October. The fat trees on Mount Royal blaze and shed. Their last radiant burst of death partakes of the rhythm of a supernova. It calls attention to itself, demanding apostrophe and pathetic fallacy; it seduces the observer from truth. It is nothing but it is experienced as distinctly and expressly human: the angry trees, the screaming stars.

Joanne and Paul have established a pattern of cohabitation. Their attitudes are crystalized; they have become predictable. Joanne reads A Season in the Life of Emmanuel by Marie-Claire Blais (in translation) and imagines that her life is a season. For now, she is the end of October: she is beautiful and dying.

In the winter she will be the Snow Queen. She will have a magic mirror, shattered by leering demons with clunky hooves and curved talons, and mesmerized inamorati will pursue her sleigh.

In spring, she is Persephone, her gift a broken pomegranate for the Underworld. She has never seen a pomegranate. She is Joanne: a season, obedient to life, its slave. She knows herself as myth: she is enlarged and subsumed.

Tom and Paul: she knows them as lovers. What else could they ever be to her? She cannot imagine them as anything else. They fill her with their lives and she absorbs them. One doesn't question what happens to food once it is eaten, until it is expelled, and then it becomes a combination of unsavory chore and pleasurable relief. Even then, the sensation is sexual. When she relieves herself of anything, throws anything away, detaches another's life from her own, she perceives the loss through the medium of her sexuality. She imagines that she has not yet run out of sensations. She believes they are finite in number, like the years of a life, and she has as much difficulty grasping the concept of insensateness as she has grasping the concept of mortality.

I just got home, Paul. Give me a chance to unwind.

Come here. I've missed you.

Stop it.

Sit still a minute.

Don't.

I know you don't mean that. Don't be so coy.

Let me up.

Alright, play tough. You'll come crawling to me one day, you'll come begging on your hands and knees, saying fuck me, fuck me, and I'll tell you to forget it.

She laughs at this. He is on his hands and knees, imitating the way he thinks she will be, scrambling across the floor in heat.

You won't say that, she says. I know you.

How come you're never horny, eh?

You're always horny.

Just when I'm around you.

Bullshit.

Come on.

At least let me get undressed.

That would be better, yes.

He helps her unfasten her bra. When her breasts pop loose, his hands are waiting for them.

Go, Beulah, you're free, he says.

Her head scissors the pale sash of daylight that lies across his belly, descending to obliterate, Medusa-like, the waves and/or particles that illuminate, shaft against shaft, the joining of parts to the whole. With pelvic precision he intuits the damp before it arrives, muscle, bone and blood cooperating to meet tissue and enzyme in a pneumatic haul that drops his jaw and presses his eyes into the kalaidoscopic corners of their sockets.

You're a nice enough guy, she says later, but you leave a bitter aftertaste.

And what's your pleasure?

The mood is not upon me.

They sleep all afternoon. There is nothing else to do. Paul has the day off and Joanne is exhausted. She was up all the previous night working on a history paper. Now she sleeps too soundly to remember her dreams.

Paul is conscious. He runs his hand down Joanne's thigh, stopping at her knee. She is sleeping on her back, her mouth slightly open. Her skin is sticky so that his hand proceeds down her leg in irregular quantum jumps. Her knee represents the point of maximum extension of his arm. He leans over to kiss her; her breath is bad. When his mouth reaches hers, she turns over, dislodging his hand. He traces with a fingernail a line along her back from ~~cock~~ to uppermost vertebra. Her flesh recedes from his touch in involuntary spasms. She is not in control. The subatomic particles that compose her body are in control, dancing away from him. They could just as easily be dancing toward him, he reflects, but they choose to isolate, to impact elsewhere. The room is warm and dry; the artificial heat dehydrates his sinuses. Outside it is cold: he hears the wind in the alley. Without a guiding, perhaps deceitful mind to will otherwise, all galaxies run for cover. She is not responsible: she is dreaming about something that she will instantly forget. He is on the surface of things, alone, accursed, cognizant.

If there is another side to reality, it is not within his province to explore it. On LSD he has seen himself from the inside out, become aware of how easy it is to slip away, to forget how to function on the outside. One's neurons are subject to misfiring. He could live forever in the right hemisphere of his brain (or is it the left? he wonders), but after a while he wouldn't know how to eat. He would wet his pants. He would shit on himself, that could happen. Was capital-T Truth worth the effort?

The twenty-two cards of the major arcanum are dealt out in four rows on the kitchen table. They belong to the Tarot of Marseilles. The picture on each card is contained within a black rectangular frame on the inner edge of which--in a different place on each card--is printed a tiny legend: B.P. Grimaud 1963.

Look over all the cards, Alan Sansavar says to Joanne. Try to get the feel of them. Concentrate on what each one says to you. Rearrange them if you like. Try to pick out four or five that seem particularly meaningful to you, then try to select one that more than any of the others seems relevant to you personally.

But I don't know what any of them mean, Joanne says.

(That's okay. Study the pictures. See if any of them are particularly appealing or strike a chord in you or anything like that. '

Joanne studies the cards one by one, selecting a few which she lays aside. The colors are the same on all the cards: blue, red, yellow and a skin-tone. She makes her final choice.

This one.

Oh-kay, Alan says. That's called the Devil.

Is that a good one?

It's not a question of any being better than the others. It's whatever appeals to you.

(I thought of taking one of these but I liked this one just a little better.

That one there is the World and the other one's the Falling Tower. I'm beginning to get a better idea of you now. But you picked the Devil, as I say.

Either she's fascinated by evil, Paul says, or she has a morbid taste in men.

If you don't mind, Paul, Alan says, it's important that she be allowed to concentrate.

Fine. I'll go inside and watch TV.

There are five colors on the card: blue (the Devil's wings, legs and genitals), red (his belt, the anvil on which he stands, the hats of the two attendant demons who flank him), yellow (the Devil's hair and antler-like horns and a narrow strip in the background behind the anvil), black (the ground beneath the two demons), and skin-tone (the Devil's arms, face and torso and the entire bodies of both demons). In addition, the Devil is holding a white sword blade in his left hand; it has no hilt. The Devil is smiling. His right arm is bent at the elbow at an angle of about forty degrees, so that the right hand is approximately level with his shoulders. He seems to be waving, as if greeting a new arrival. The two demons also appear to be smiling, although their expressions are essentially vacant; unlike their master, who is looking straight at the viewer, they appear to be watching something out of frame in the middle distance. Their hands are concealed behind their backs, apparently tied there, judging from the way their elbows are splayed. Around each of their necks is fastened a cord, the other end of which is tied to a ring in the center of the anvil. They, too, have antlers (as well as large, pointed ears) and each of their legs ends in three long toes.

I thought he was going to take all night. What did he have to say for almost two hours?

He just went on and on. You know what he's like.

Anyway, now that he's gone we can pick up where we left off this afternoon.

You couldn't possibly be horny again. I'm beat.

You can't be that tired. It's only eleven.

Alan said I have a tendency to do what other people think I should and not what I think. Is that true?

Ask him, he's the magician.

I told you what he said.

It seems to me ~~you~~ do what you want most of the time.

What do you want to do that you don't do now?

I don't know. Lot's of things.

Like what?

I don't know. I want to go to the beach, for example.

There's no beach around here.

I want to go where there is one then.

So go. I'm not stopping you.

I don't know if I really want to.

Well, what do you really want to do?

What I really want to do is kick you in the balls.

Nice talk. That's really nice.

Dope

It is dark except for a light in the bathroom and a candle on the table, and there is Japanese music. Occasionally the candleflame seems to pick up the truncated rhythm of the music's twangs and dongs and appears to pulse in time to it.

Are you stoned at all?

Just a little, Paul says.

I'm not at all, J.D. says.

They can hear Alan pacing back and forth in the bedroom, unattuned to the music's subtle dissonance.

I wish he'd sit down, J.D. says.

Paul raises a bottle of warm Molson to his mouth and sips from it.

Actually, his footsteps are starting to make sense.

Hey! J.D. shouts.

Not so loud, Paul says.

Alan!

Shh!

Come here a minute!

Christ.

Alan looks haggard and morose. His clothing is improperly assembled on his body and his hair is clinging to his cheeks and lips.

What are you up to in there? Paul says.

Alan shrugs.

Why don't you sit down for a while, J.D. says. We'll roll another one.

I'm thinking, Alan says.

Fuck that, J.D. says.

I happen to be one of the foremost systematic thinkers in Montreal, Alan says. So fuck you.

What are you thinking about? Paul says.

Alan shrugs again, an exaggerated gesture that brings his bony, elongated shoulders nearly to his ears. J.D. hands him a sloppily rolled joint.

You light it, J.D. says.

You shouldn't let him slobber on them, Paul says.

Let him, let him.

Then you smoke the fucking thing.

No problem.

Alan sits down and sucks on the marijuana. J.D. watches him hungrily. Paul listens to the music. It stops suddenly, with no finale.

I've been thinking, Alan says. You're not really a very nice guy. I mean, I like you and everything, but you're kind of a bastard.

Are you talking to me? Paul says.

Yes.

What do you mean?

You lie to people.

So?

Well, you have no respect for the truth.

Man, I just can't get off, J.D. says.

I've worked out a theory of truth, Alan says, that I think is quite reasonable.

I'm starving, J.D. says.

Oh, shut up, will you, Alan says.

You have any money? Paul says.

Are you kidding, J.D. says.

If you don't want to listen, never mind, Alan says.

I'm listening, I'm listening, Paul says.

Forget it.

Alright.

Let's go out, J.D. says.

Good, Paul says.

Weren't you supposed to take Joanne somewhere tonight?

Alan says.

I don't remember.

He is at a party in Sogdiana. Roxanne, whom he has recently married, is in her quarters. It is not known whether she is waiting for him or if she has already given him up; in any case, she speaks no Greek and, unlike his mother, is not partial to wine. When he is sufficiently drunk he rises to leave.

They have lost interest in the strippers, whom they have seen too often. This is a club where J.D. is well known. He has left Paul and Alan alone at the bar. A man sitting next to Paul turns to speak to him.

Hey, what's happening?

Not much, Paul says.

This place is alright.

Sometimes.

You ever been to Boston?

Where's that?

What?

Just kidding.

Hey, what's your name, man?

Paul.

I'm Sly. You can call me Slick.

Okay, Slick. What's new in Boston?

I don't know, I been here. Me and my old lady come up.

Where is she?

Working.

She work around here?

She's a dancer. I got her in some club in the east.
The east of Montreal. You know that place?

Vaguely.

Is it tough out there?

Depends.

I don't want her getting in no trouble. I told her
come straight back. There ain't too many black people
up here. I don't want her doing no tricks less she know
her people.

Well, I wouldn't go out there.

Rubbish, Alan says. I used to live in the east end.

My friend Alan, Paul says. He means way east, Alan.

I don't see the distinction.

Forget it. Go back to sleep.

Why wouldn't you go out there? Slick says.

It's mostly French and I don't speak it.

She don't speak no French either. She better come
straight back after the show.

J.D. taps Paul on the shoulder.

Where you been? Paul says.

In the can.

Hey, J.D., this is Slick. Call him Sly.

It's the other way around, Sly says.

My name's Wicked, J.D. says.

What's happening?

Real shit, man.

Where's some action?

Who knows.

Hey, I'm going to call my old lady.

Give her my best, Paul says.

Who is this guy? J.D. says.

Don't know.

Man, I have to watch you every minute.

His chick's a dancer. Maybe you know her.

Is she black?

I guess so.

Too hard to book. Hey, there's Mireille. Listen,
I want you to do me a favor. When she comes over here,
tell her your brother just had his legs broken. Alright?

What brother?

Shh. Mimi, how are you?

Okay, J.D. Ça va?

Ça marche. This is Paul. Remember those guys I
was telling you about? They broke his brother's legs.

Really? She looks at Paul. How come?

Because he didn't pay them on time, that's why, J.D.
says. Same as me. Played poker with the wrong guys, and
now they're after me.

Mireille studies Paul carefully. It's true? she says.

Sure is. Broke both of them.

Why do you play with guys like that? she says to J.D.

I don't know. In my business you meet a lot of these guys. Listen, can you let me have the fifteen hundred like you said?

I'll go tomorrow to the bank, I suppose. Where will you be?

Paul will pick it up. Meet him around five at the Rainbow.

Okay, J.D. You got me booked next week?

Yeah, I'll put you in a real nice place, don't worry.

You'll make a lot, I promise.

Okay, J.D. Salut.

Is she nuts or what? J.D.says.

I got news for you, Paul says.

The old J.D. touch comes through again.

Except I won't be there.

What do you mean? I'm asking you as a friend. I'll give you two hundred of it, how's that?

No way. And I'll bet she won't be there either.

Sure she will. She's crazy about me.

Crazy doesn't explain it. Go yourself.

Thanks a lot, buddy.

Don't mention it. I have to make a call.

Thanks a lot. Ask me a favor some day, shithead.

The distance from his couch to the door is probably about twenty or thirty feet. If the party is taking place in a tent, it is perhaps less, and the door will be a flap of canvass or leather. In either case, the revelers, some of whom are barely conscious at this point, make room for him to pass. He is accustomed to having a clear path, so he is a little surprised to find himself accosted by an old woman. He recognizes her as the seer who has been following his camp since Syria. He realizes that she is trying to prevent him from leaving. It is crucial that he remain until dawn, she cautions. It is not unusual for him to party all night. Grinning, he asks for more wine.

I don't know what time I'll be home.

It's already two. What are you doing?

I'm having a drink with Alan and J.D. I'll be home soon.

Not J.D. again. What do you have to see that sleazy creep for?

He's my friend.

He's an asshole. What's Alan doing?

He's thinking.

What's he thinking about?

Truth.

Eh?

Truth.- That's why I'm not lying to you.

Christ, another idiot. You make a fine pair, the
three of you.

Eh?

Oh, leave me alone. Don't bother coming home.

I'm coming, I told you. Soon.

Forget I exist.

How can I forget with you screaming at me?

I'm not screaming.

You are so.

You better be home soon.

I will, I will. Go to sleep.

That's all I ever do. Never with you, it seems.

What's that supposed to mean?

Nothing.

I'll see you later.

Yeah, sure.

Bye.

Yeah.

At his tent the conspirators are waiting. They have waited for a night when all six of them would comprise the guard. He is long overdue. They will cut him down so there can be no mistake, no dependence on a chancy potion. They watch the stars. Still, he does not come. The stars begin to blink out as the sky starts to pale. They hear the approach of footsteps and they draw their swords. It is the next shift, come to relieve them. Still they wait, doggedly hanging around, engaging the others in conversation.

She wasn't there, Sly says. I'm getting worried.

What time does she finish? Paul says.

Two-thirty.

It's not time yet.

They said she'd left already.

Maybe she went home.

She wasn't there either.

Don't worry about it, she'll turn up.

J.D. punches Alan in the shoulder.

Hey. Hey.

What?

Say something.

What?

Anything. Truth.

Truth. Yes.

Tell us about it, Paul says.

I don't think I will.

What's the matter?

Motherfucker's stoned, Sly says.

Well, sort of, Alan says. It's supposed to be mescaline but it isn't. Mescaline's impossible to find around here. I mean real mescaline. Everybody sells this stuff they say is mescaline but it's not even close.

What is it? Paul says.

Horse tranquilizer, probably.

What's it like?

It's not bad but it's not mescaline.

Too bad.

I wouldn't buy no dope in this place, J.D. says.

Are we leaving? Sly says.

Pretty soon, Paul says.

I got a little blow, Sly says. You want a little--
what's his name?

Alan.

Hey, Slim, you want a little blow? Sly says

I wouldn't mind.

Okay.

Sly rolls a dollar bill into a thin tube, then spreads a small piece of tin foil on the bar, exposing half a gram of white powder.

Hey, that's better, J.D. says.

I wish I wasn't so drunk, Paul says.

Finally, he comes. He is almost sober now, which they did not expect. He thanks them for waiting up for him and gives them money. They do not strike: there are too many others. He enters his tent and falls instantly asleep. Later, they will be betrayed by the lover of one of their company. Because they are Macedonians, they will be condemned to death by stoning.

La Grande is crowded when they arrive and the music is loud.

Watch yourself in here, J.D. says. Half these chicks are guys in drag. The other half had operations.

Hey, I feel pretty good, Paul says.

You look epileptic, Alan says.

What do you mean? I'm having a Dostoevskian moment.

Don't tell me about it.

So, Paul says. Truth.

Alan shakes his head, Hell.

What, this place? Look at Sly, will you. He seems pretty absorbed. Like a drop of water in a sponge.

There are two kinds of truth, Alan says. There's an abstract kind, the kind that has to do with logical propositions, and there's a more concrete kind, that has to do with, say, reality, or the world as opposed to pure thought.

I see, Paul says.

You guys make me sick, J.D. says. All this bullshit.

What about religious truth? Paul says.

Well, that's a different thing.

The music is continuous, one song mixing into the next. The dancing, in contrast, is more spasmodic, and no one lasts very long on the dance floor. The gyrations of the dancers seem to be an extension of the music. Occasionally, a strobe light flashes for a minute or two, but it makes little difference: it is impossible to separate the movements of the bodies from the sound that inspires them. This is perhaps due to the quality of the light, which is vaguely unreal, even when the strobe is off. The walls of the room are painted black; depictions of cartoon monsters glow from them in luminescent greens and yellows. This effect is achieved by concealed ultraviolet lamps that also reveal every speck of dust and dandruff on Paul's black corduroy jacket.

Fucking Christ, I just can't get off, J.D. says.

This Christly coke is lousy, man.

Didn't have enough, Sly says..

I have a corollary theory of religious truth, as well, Alan says.

Give me a break, J.D. says.

That fucking bitch, Sly says. She better show up.

She'll make it, Paul says.

She's probably out tricking. I told her not to. She supposed to phone me from every place she go, make sure she's alright. Shit.

Paul is listening to the music. It does not stop suddenly. There is no finale. It goes on and on, each song mixing into the next.

Coquilles St. Jacques

The light in the room is a pale yellow--it seems yellow--and the floor, several feet below his eyes, appears grimy, as do the walls, especially the one behind the stove. There is an element of inference in this, for the room has not been washed in some time and both his eyesight and the wattage of the two bulbs in the ceiling fixture are weak. The window to the right of the stove and perpendicular to it looks out onto a small yard surrounded by a dilapidated wooden fence; this, too, is an inference, for at the moment there is only blackness beyond the window which reflects, with minor distortions (the chief of which is a loss of depth), the interior of the room.

The stove is gold in color, with black and silver dials and black iron pot rests over the gas rings. On the wall behind the stove and slightly to the left of it is a wooden rack from which pots and pans of various sizes are suspended on metal hooks.

The kitchen smells mildly of grease--bacon fat, probably. This odor gradually fades until after a few moments it is no longer noticed; in fact, it becomes undetectable. The only sound of any significance is the hiss of the gas and the faint roaring of the tiny jets of blue flame.

He drops half a pound of scallops into boiling white wine, adds a liberal grinding of black pepper, crushes a palmful of parsley flakes between his fingers and sprinkles them on top. Then he melts a tablespoon of butter until it is a sizzling brown noix and sautées a panful of mushrooms. At the counter he mashes two potatoes with a little milk and shreds a third of a brick of sharp cheddar. When the scallops are properly poached he drains the hot, fishy wine into a saucepan with a roux and stirs it with a wooden spoon until it is thick and lumpless, melting half the cheese into it. He places the scallops and mushrooms into a pie plate, rims the circumference with mashed potatoes, pours in the creamy cheese sauce, sprinkles the remainder of the cheese over the sauce and puts the dish under the broiler until the top is browned.

Coquilles St. Jacques à l'Herold. Sans coquilles, however; pétoncles Herold, more accurately. Pétoncles Mornay, peut-etre? No, it isn't quite a proper Mornay, is it? The wine in the sauce gives it a slightly piquante bite under the cheesy flavor.

A third record drops onto the turntable (Time for a new stereo, Bill): Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), born the year Frederick the Great invaded Saxony to start

the Seven Years War, Symphony No. 29 in A-major, K. 201, Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. (A bit too much pepper, perhaps.) First movement, let's see, allegro moderato? How many oboes? Two oboes and probably two horns. Demoniac, as Goethe said, an entire work from a single spiritual impulse.

Pétroncles Mozart--that's it. With a crisp Liebfraumilch to guide them home.

Chops appear, before he has time to turn his head. For an instant there is a thumb on the edge of the plate and then it is gone. For a moment his back is warmed by the proximity of his mother's body and then it is cool again.

If the gravy tastes of oregano and garlic, the chops are lamb; if it tastes of pepper and ~~tyme~~ tyme, they are veal; if brown sugar, soy and garlic, they are pork. If the plate contains roast beef instead of chops, it will be overcooked and he will have trouble swallowing it. The selection of vegetables is unrelated to the type of meat being served; carrots and string beans are the most common, but sometimes there are boiled or roasted potatoes as well. They are almost always uninviting.

The carrots have been boiled in cherry brandy and honey. This knowledge, gleaned from their odor, evokes a smile from him. Behind his back, Catherine is invisible;

she continues to stand there, waiting, he assumes, for his response. What has she said? (She never writes anything down.) Béchamel, with wine or cheese or both.

After supper he sits by the window with a book. The words elude him. His mind is preoccupied with nothing; dull, thickly unresponsive, restive. He is pacing the room, hitting his head against the wall, flying out the window, screaming into the night. Sometimes the eidetic scream is the last nightmarish gasp of pre-vocal anguish; sometimes it is a desperate, take-a-last-shot self-assertion of life; sometimes it is a thousand daggers entering his chest simultaneously; sometimes it just feels good; but always it is confined, never more than the image of a scream, an imagined letting go, while outside the curtains lap lightly against the window, the pages turn uncomprehended in his lap, and mathematical Mozart civilizes the universe.

The telephone rings.

(When the woman picks up the receiver and says hello there is no answer. Her eyes display a nuance of fear, more or less implicit if she is a competent actress. After replacing the receiver in its cradle she stares into space, as if she has just been summoned to her own execution. Her uneasiness in this scene is almost comical, for it is way out of proportion to the trivial occurrence that provokes it.)

5

He lets it ring four times before he answers it. There is a possibility that it will stop after the third ring. The implication of such a happening is that the call is unimportant. If the person who has initiated the call allows it to ring a fourth time (or longer), this persistence can be translated into significance. Each successive ring multiplies the potential meaningfulness of the signaled message.

It is Catherine.

How is she?

She's okay. Him?

He's fine.

Is she disturbing him?

No, he was just sitting around watching himself go crazy.

She says nothing.

Cathy?

She's there.

What has she been up to?

Nothing special. She just thought she'd call him.

He's glad. Is everything okay with her?

More or less. What does he mean, going crazy?

Just a figure of speech.

Oh. Bill?

He's still here.

Does he miss her a little?

He misses her a lot.

She misses him, too.

When is she going to cut this out and come home?

She doesn't know. She's not ready yet. She wants to be sure. He wants her to be sure, doesn't he?

He supposes so. He wishes she'd make up her mind.

She's not ready yet, Bill.

Alright, he supposes that's fair enough.

Why doesn't he call her sometime?

He doesn't know. But he's glad she called.

She guesses she'll say goodnight then.

Bye, Cathy.

He goes downtown and has a few drinks in a bar. After some deliberation, he decides to speak to the woman (fortyish, a little heavy) sitting next to him.

If you know you're going to have nightmares, he says, after some small talk, if you sleep in the dark, then the thing to do is stay awake, no?

Why not just put the light on? she says.

Won't work. You see, it will still be dark outside.
That's the important thing.

I don't get it.

Well, it doesn't matter.

When he opens the door, the interior of the house smells stuffy. There are dishes piled in the sink, encrusted with cheese. Records are scattered all over the living room floor. There is nothing left over to eat. He lies on his bed in the dark and repeats the word "bitch" six times to himself before he falls asleep. By the fourth "bitch" he is no longer sure if he is referring to Catherine or to the woman in the bar or to anyone at all.

The People Upstairs

Down through the ceiling, through the wood and the plaster and the layers of paint, comes the chanting of many voices, prolonged, monotonous, unmusical. Paul and Joanne are lying on their backs, listening in the dark.

They're doing it again, Joanne says.

She's heard this before?

Yesterday afternoon around five. And last week, Tuesday or Wednesday, they started around eight o'clock. It's beginning to get scary.

It's two in the morning, he can't believe it.

The wordless chant drones eerily on. It is not quite a monotone, for it varies in both pitch and volume; despite these variations, however, there are no gaps of silence. Nor are any words discernible. Perhaps it is a foreign language, muffled to indistinctness by the ceiling; or it may be no more than a rhythmic moan.

What are they doing up there? Joanne says.

Maybe they're Moselms or something. Hindus? Or Satanists.

She thinks they must be Hindus.

He thinks they're Satanists. He begins a low moan, echoing the chant.

Stop that.

Maybe they're looking for some innocent woman to have Rosemary's baby. Maybe they want some innocent woman to use as a human sacrifice.

Stop scaring her, Paul, she won't be able to sleep.

He promises not to tell them she's here.

He'd better not.

He was planning to sell her to the gypsies anyway.

She switches on the lamp and bolts from the bed. Paul covers his face with the sheet and listens. The chanting stops. The brief silence is followed by several loud bangs and scraping noises.

It sounds like they're moving furniture up there, Paul says. Hey, what is she doing?

She's making tea.

She is sitting with her back to the door, her hair tangled and splayed over the top of her nightgown, cutting small pieces from a brick of cheese and eating them rapidly.

He thinks they are Hindus.

He sits down and stares at the brown formica tabletop. Joanne rewraps the cheese in Saran and places it off to one side, leaning the knife against it at a right angle. They drink a cup of tea.

It is always raining. Their clothes are ruined and they must scrub the rust from their swords each morning. Still, he keeps them moving, back and forth along the bank of the Hydaspes. Their enemy cannot guess where he will cross. Each time he moves, they must move with him. He watches his men advance in the night to the river. Their war cries commence. On the opposite bank, the army of Porus is drawn up to receive them. Alexander is not in a hurry; he retires his army. The Indian ascetics have stamped their feet in answer to his speculations: only the land he stands on will be his. The enemy will stand in the rain all night, deprived of their dreams, harassed by snakes. They will wait every night in the mud for their husband. When they are bored and despair of his coming, he will have them.

Joanne is kneeling on the kitchen floor picking up the corpses of cockroaches with a paper towel. She has found eight of them in the cabinet under the sink. A few were still alive, pulling themselves painfully across the shelf to die in some secret place; these she crushed with a shoe.

They are of a common variety, medium sized, for the most part, and dark brown. A few are light brown, almost

a caramel color; for some reason, she finds these more unpleasant than the others. When they are cornered, they stand perfectly still, but they seem unable to prevent their antennae from waving. In addition to the color factor, she is more disgusted by the long skinny ones than by the short broad ones. It is difficult to say which form of behavior reflects greater panic, standing still or bolting for the almost invisible openings where the floor of the cabinet meets the walls, which are caused by imperfections in the joining of the wood or warping.

Paul watches her from the table. She has to virtually squat on her heels to get into the cabinet, so that her body looks very compact. Her head cannot be seen but a section of her ponytail lies vertically across her back, directly over her bent spine.

The table is bare except for a half-empty pint bottle of gin, a tumbler with a bevelled rim, and the latest issue of Time magazine, face down.

It smells like they sprayed today, he says.

That's right. She's collecting the bodies.

Bring out yer dead, he intones.

Of course, he wouldn't want to help her.

It's all too ghoulish for him. Next year they'll move.

Does he really think he'll find some place that doesn't have them?

2

(He wonders where they come from. They're the oldest species of anything on earth, he tells her. They haven't changed in three hundred million years, or something like that. They never evolved. They were born perfect. In the Middle East they even have wings, the bastards.

The landlord was here with the sprayers. He said the people upstairs brought them.

Those devils.

He says they're filthy, these people. He can hardly stand to go into their apartment, it stinks so much. He says they have garbage piled everywhere.

(Paul pours himself another inch of gin. There is something solid about inches. He does not believe in centimeters and other disturbing novelties.

And they have such lovely voices, too, he says.

They're moving out soon. He says they're leaving at the end of the month.

There goes her career.

Joanne goes into the bathroom with her handful of paper towels and flushes them down the toilet.

He said they're English, she says.

English what?

English like us.

I suppose he's going to hold it against us.

(He said he'd evict them if they didn't clean the place up. He told them that.

The bath is hot. He surmises this from the quantity of steam that emanates from the bathroom, the door of which is perpendicular to the kitchen door and separated from it by two four-inch sections of wall that meet at right angles. He cannot actually see the steam but he can feel its damp warmth. Joanne is splashing in the tub as she washes herself. He continues to drink from his glass, staring at the wall on the other side of the table, which is flush against it. Patches of green show where the yellow paint has chipped off.

Fifteen November

Every street is a corridor, every building is a room, every park is a conservatory, every plaza is a solarium, or patio, etc. There is no outside. The sky is a perpetual ceiling of constantly changing veils. One's house is always inhabited by strangers, some of whom may be hostile. On the other hand, one is always at home, even in the dark. It is this that is frightening.

When he wakes up he can see sunlight through the thick orange curtains. The room itself, which is painted white, partakes of this combination: the light, filtered through the curtains, makes the walls appear to be pale orange.

Someone is playing Greek music in an apartment across the alley. The music is quite loud and it is what has awakened him.

The gallery door is open at the far wall of the living room and he can see his neighbors sitting on their balcony directly opposite him. They are looking down into the alley, where squeals and high-pitched shouts indicate that children are playing.

Paul studies the man, guessing his age to be about thirty; his hair is short and greasy and he is just beginning to get heavy. His wife, with her hair dyed black,

her waistline flab and lined face, seems much older--over forty. Last night, at around one-thirty in the morning, this man caused a commotion in the alley. He tried for a long time to start his car, without success; eventually, he succeeded in flooding the engine. He jumped out and looked under the hood for no apparent purpose, touching nothing; then he slammed the hood down with such force that it bounced back up. He slammed it again and held it shut with his hands; then he slammed the car door he had left open and stalked away. Paul, whom he had awakened, heard him enter his apartment, where he slammed that door as well.

Paul's neighbors seem intent on exacerbating his abhorance of them at every opportunity. One or another of the families next door is always doing something too loudly: shouting at their children, playing music at exaggerated amplification, laughing with abnormal intensity, arguing and cursing with no attempt to conceal their domestic disorders. Now he applies himself to the ritual of retaliation. He carefully positions the radio on a chair near the gallery door, finds a station that is playing a Beethoven symphony (the Fifth, he believes)--to kill with horns, strings and tympani the somehow bestial bazoukis--turns the volume up full, and goes to take a shower.

When he returns the opposing balcony is deserted. Its door is shut and the curtains are drawn. There is no music. He treats himself to a lunch of strawberries and Cool Whip.

Cynthia Bradley calls Mrs. Chris Watson to confirm an invitation to bridge.

You're coming for dinner, I hope, Cynthia says. I'm making Chris' favorite.

That's fine.

Say sevenish?

Perfect. How have you been, Cynthia?

I've been fine, Debbie. I'm looking forward to seeing you.

The phone sits on a counter in the kitchen. This counter is perpendicular to the outside wall and divides the room into two nearly equal areas. The area where Cynthia is sitting contains a table and four chairs. The table and chairs are yellow, as is the phone which Cynthia now holds in her lap. On the table is a boxlike directory, which displays the alphabet along one edge. It is necessary, in order to open it to the desired place, to move a small metal arrow under one of the letters and then press the long bar that runs along the bottom. This action causes the lid to flip open, carrying with it all the phone number/address cards that precede in alphabetical order the indicated letter. Cynthia opens the directory

to P and dials her son's number.

How you been, ma? Paul says.

Comme ci, comme ça. How's everything with you?

Oh, pretty good.

Your father wants to know when you're going to stop wasting your life.

That's a good one.

Joanne sits in the window of Casa Pedro and sips a Sangria, watching the people rush past on Maisonneuve. The entire outer wall of this room consists of glass doors, which are left open in the summer. She calculates that approximately 85% of the pedestrians who pass between four-thirty and five o'clock turn to stare in through the glass wall as they go by. The other 15% tend to have their eyes fixed on the sidewalk, preoccupied, self-absorbed, perhaps a little solipsistic, as they compose concertos or contemplate suicide.

A man smiles down at her.

May I sit here? he asks.

She studies his face. As each feature is registered it is instantly forgotten, so that no composite can be formed and no judgment arrived at. He has placed his face so close to hers that she can only deal with it feature by feature. Each of these is, in its own way, completely unremarkable.

The man sits down without waiting for her to reply. He stares at her for several seconds, still smiling. Then he looks at her glass. A moment later she does the same. This moment is occupied by a brief conflict: she knows what her glass contains and has no desire to look at it; yet she cannot help but follow his gaze. She knows in advance that she will do so, even though she tells herself that she will not. She is thus aware of two mutually exclusive possibilities simultaneously, and because the one she executes is contrary to the one she chooses . . .

Go fuck yourself, she says.

Catherine Herold walks through the concourse of Place Bonaventure, window shopping. Some of the corridors double back; others end in cul-de-sacs. The layout, although it is relatively simple, confuses her. The colors blur until she is aware only of brown.

She enters a boutique and tries on a dress. She fits into a size ten. It is her hair that bothers her; if she were to touch it up she could pass for thirty-five.

She drinks a cup of coffee in Papa Dan's. Bill is not much of a coffee drinker. She counts her change; she continues to count it, over and over, afraid to get up.

In another boutique the salesgirl seems friendly.

Do you think beige suits me? Catherine asks her, adjusting the cuff from which the tags dangle.

Maybe something a little darker, the girl says. Blue is good for you.

She walks through the tunnel into Central Station and up into Place Ville Marie. There is nowhere to go. Here she is confronted by more interlocking corridors. It is possible to wander from concourse to concourse indefinitely, or to take the Métro to other, more distant plazas. One need never emerge into daylight. Cynthia is having people in for dinner and they will play cards until rather late. It is easier to wander the underground streets, a still life of fashionably dressed mannequins behind each window, than to utter an intelligible sentence to a stranger.

Place Ville Marie passes quickly from orange to grey.. By finding the proper angles between the buildings it is possible to see the river. Either it is too cold for football or the ground is too hard; in any case, there is no game in progress on the right quadrangle. Herold squirts a blob of translucent green soap into the palm of each hand and washes them under the tap. The mirror shows that he has lost weight, for his clothes are too loose. There is a bulging curve of flesh between the point of his chin and his Adam's apple. If he bends his head forward so that the

chin approaches the small cavity above his breastbone, he appears to have a double chin. In fact, this has always been there, even when he was a skinny adolescent. There is nothing he can do about it; his face will never be angular. He will always have a weak profile. Still, a properly trimmed beard might give his face the desired angularity and conceal the flaw.

Cynthia Bradley

The Watsons arrive a little early. Peter compliments Chris on his new coat, stroking its lamb collar before hanging it up. Debbie clasps my hands between hers and kisses the air next to my cheek, careful not to mingle what she has rubbed on her face with what I have rubbed on mine. Peter leads us into the living room.

"I was just preparing the drinks," he says.

"Rye and ginger for me," Chris says.

"I've cooked up something different this time," Peter says. "Let me get it."

"What's he been concocting now?" Chris says, squeezing Debbie's knee. He is determined not to be serious, throwing me a faint smile of suspicion, a little nervous perhaps that I will somehow infect his jocularity with an unexpected, incongruent mood, convinced (as he has been for years) that I am incapable of frivolity, or that I have any capacity to experience pleasure. I try to match my return smile with something in my eyes, for I know that it is there that he will seek the reassurance he demands. This is my dinner; I have cooked it and I will serve it, but its raison d'être, apparently, is to reintegrate me into life, to bring me together again with old friends, to make me feel alright. They are still suspicious of

me, even Debbie; they aren't sure I'm quite there, that I am responsive. Even Debbie (a little heavier than usual) is distanced; she doesn't know how to approach me. It seems it is they who are not here; they who must make the effort to start all over again.

"He spent all afternoon poring over his bartender's guide," I say. "God knows what he's come up with."

"You're looking very good," Debbie says.

"Yes, you are," Chris says.

"Thanks," I say. "I feel great."

"Here we go," Peter says, returning with a tray.

"Sink your teeth into this."

Debbie leans forward and studies the tray before taking one of the glasses. "What is it?"

"Go ahead, try it," Peter says. He sits back and swallows a gulp. "Mmm."

I take a tentative sip through a head of foam.

"Tastes like rum or gin," Chris says.

"It's delicious, whatever it is," Debbie says.

"What's in that, Cointreau?" Chris says.

"It's called Between the Sheets," Peter says.

I try not to drink it too quickly; Peter is watching me from behind his smile. "I'd better check the ham," I say.

"Oh, I love ham," Chris says.

I've overcooked it; it looks dry but the glaze should make it palatable. This is my first attempt at a meal in three months. The last time I was sick I thought I'd give up cooking, everyone else was doing it for me. They tried to make me eat all kinds of things but I was never hungry. I lost about twenty-five pounds and at first it felt good. Dr. Marchand was worried, though, and he got Peter worried. Peter kept trying to coax me to eat; he brought me pastries and fruit and even Chinese food one time but Dr. Marchand said not to insist. He said I would eat sooner or later, that anorexia was not one of my symptoms. He called things symptoms; it was a symptom that I didn't want to talk to anybody or see anyone or even get out of bed. Symptomatic of exactly what he never said.

I peek at the carrots and they look about ready. I am trying something different this time, steaming them in a double-boiler. I put the bacon rolls in the oven.

I remember that I have left my drink in the other room. I find Peter's cocktail mixture in the refrigerator, almost a quart of it in an old rum bottle. I pour some into a tumbler and drink it down. It really is good after all, sweet and cold. I pour out another glassful and put the rest away.

The bacon rolls are popping grease onto the broiler element and small flames dart around inside the oven.

Peter comes in for another round.

"Almost ready?" he says.

"Just a few more minutes. You can start herding them into the dining room."

"There's only two of them. Not much of a herd, unless they stampede."

"Pass me that glove."

He brings me the quilted mitten and kisses the back of my neck. He stops and I know he has noticed my glass. He is hesitating because he is not sure what to say to me. I think he wants to get angry but is afraid to, afraid to sensitize the carefully constructed party atmosphere, afraid to make things worse. His hesitation is so desperate that I want to tell him to say it quickly, that I'm alright, that he has the right to say something. I want to reassure him somehow but I find his indecision contemptible; I resent it but I don't want to get upset; I don't want to spoil his mood any more than he wants it to be spoiled. I want to make him happy for at least a few hours.

"You finish it," I say.

There is relief in his smile and pain, too, for I have initiated a formal, semi-social transaction that designates a fixed role to him that he has no choice but to enact.

Dr. Marchand was talking to Peter--I was there but I wasn't; they knew I wasn't or thought I wasn't, at least Dr. Marchand did, although Peter didn't seem to really believe it--Peter was fidgety and his mouth was funny, sort of trembling and unsure, and Dr. Marchand said--I called him my teddy bear, Dr. T. Bear; he had a beard and a tremendous stomach but he didn't sweat the way fat people sweat and he always smelled well-lotioned and I knew he took care of himself--he talked very softly, although sometimes he spoke loudly for effect, but it never did any good; his tone was reassuring, not to me so much or to any of his other patients as far as I could tell, but to Peter, or so it seemed, although Peter always looked nervous around him, a little embarrassed, I think, not about himself but about me, but not about me as myself but as I was to him, that is, as a wife, and he a husband to such a wife, but Dr. Marchand never seemed to notice or ever give him cause for uneasiness--Peter's lips often trembled when he visited me but

Dr. Marchand was very soothing and he said--he didn't want to say it in front of me, understandably, but Peter made him; Peter was sort of testing the diagnosis, not really believing that I wasn't really there but sort of putting Dr. Marchand to the test to see if he really believed it himself--he said:

"Don't insist, don't insist. But be a little firm, gentle but firm. Let her go at her own pace but don't let her squeeze you out."

"How long do you think this will go on, Doctor?"

"It's partially up to you, Mr. Bradley. You tend to let her go too far."

"I wanted her to be happy."

"Do you think she's happy now?"

"Is she anything now?"

"Oh, yes, she's--"

"I don't want to hear about it any more."

"You know, Mr. Bradley, the unfortunate thing is what she's doing to you. Oh, not on purpose, not maliciously, but frankly, well to be perfectly honest and with all due respect, she's got you by the balls, if you'll excuse the expression."

I was there. I was there all the time.

"Don't be silly, " Peter says. "Go ahead and enjoy yourself. This is your party. But Cynthia, how about making this one your last?"

"I don't want it. Here, take it."

"Calm down, honey. Hey, those things are starting to burn."

"Take the goddamn thing, will you."

I reach for the glass to give it to him but he grabs my elbow as I swing around and the glass drops to the floor. Peter lets me go and, taking the mitten from my hand, rescues the bacon rolls. They are only a little charred. The floor is sticky under my feet. He looks at me again. I laugh at first and then he laughs; his relief is so obvious, so intrusive and false to the moment that I want to stop laughing, but I can't until he stops me with his mouth before I get hysterical.

"Let me ask you," Dr. Marchand said. "How do you feel before it starts--cheerful, amused? Are you in a good mood?"

"No, not cheerful. Maybe amused at first. Sort of like something's funny a bit. Then nothing, really, just

like laughing. Then--then scared, I guess. I don't know why, or of what, sort of scared I won't be able to stop. I want to scream, I know I do, I feel the scream rising inside me, forming inside and then shooting up as if from a great distance, like something flying along a corridor toward a window, like my mouth's a window, but all I can do is laugh and laugh and then there's sort of nothing. I've sort of moved inside the window with the scream and the laughter is on the outside and I'm not really scared any more, but I'm kind of away from it all."

He gave me pills. I took them; then I stopped taking them. I went away for a long time with the scream and he gave me needles. At some point I came back.

"What about this ham, eh?" Chris says, warmly, with a look half expressive of approbation, half requesting it.

"Delicibus," Debbie says, with equal warmth, half to satisfy Chris and half to compliment me, anxious to praise, to demonstrate her friendship, eager to rebuild that friendship, but I know she means it.

"Have some more bacon rolls," I say.

"Let me save some room for the salad," Peter says.

"I'll have some," Chris says. "Jesus, every time we come here I eat enough for a week." He points his fork at Debbie. "Tomorrow we diet."

"You say that every time," she says, "but do you ever do it?"

"Wait till you see the desserts," Peter says.

"Cynthia's been baking for two days."

"Next time we'll bring the kids," Debbie says.

"They're always complaining that I never make desserts."

"So am I," Chris says.

"I never had the knack," Debbie says.

"We'd love to see them again," Peter says. "Eh, Cynthia?"

"Do they play bridge?" I say, and the Watsons laugh appreciatively.

"Look, it's easy," Peter said. He explained the point-count system.

"I'll never remember all this," I said.

"It's easy," Chris said. "You'll pick it right up."

"Why can't we play something else?"

"You'll like it once you get used to it," Peter said.

"Now, I dealt so I bid first. I'll start with a heart."

"Pass," Debbie said.

"Now," Peter said, "if you have at least six points you can answer."

"Answer what?"

"Bid your best suit," Chris said.

Chris was sitting in a deck chair, wearing a blue and white bathing suit; his eyes were invisible behind his sunglasses.

"Look at that husband of yours," he said. "Showing off again, Peter?" he shouted.

Peter was bouncing up and down on the edge of the diving board. He knelt down and appeared to be examining the water. Then he gripped the edges of the board and slowly lifted his body into a handstand.

"What's he trying to do?" I said.

"Watch this," Chris said.

Peter suddenly jerked himself forward and slid vertically into the water with hardly a splash. He stayed a long time at the bottom of the pool, drifting toward the shallow end, hardly moving, a perfect economy of energy, like a seasnake. His bursting from the water was a shock, a tumult of water and loud exhalation and panting after the grave, muffled, almost solemn maneuver he had just executed.

"Try some of this wine," Peter says.

"Let me see the bottle," Chris says.

"It's Spanish," Peter says.

Dr. Marchand had on a blue suit and a vest. He was talking to Peter. Peter was folding and unfolding his hands. I couldn't tell what they were saying. Maybe I could tell but forgot. I remember the blue suit.

"It's amazing how he does that," I said to Chris. "He's so perfectly at ease in the water, so natural. I think he's more himself under water than normally."

"He was always a great swimmer. But you're right, he's a little clumsy on dry land."

"Water really is his element."

"What's your element?" he asked in an uncharacteristically insinuating way. I could almost recreate the expression in his invisible eyes from the evidence of his facial muscles, which were taut and seemingly suspended in anticipatory tension. He looked at me with those black squares. I watched Peter swim back and forth across the pool in an easy, liquid crawl.

"Air," I said.

"Here they come," I say.

"My God, there must be twelve different kinds," Chris says.

"Thirteen."

"Where am I going to put them?"

"You'll find a space," Debbie says.

"I always do."

Debbie is strange tonight, not herself at all. I suppose it's difficult for her to play the role of stranger but she can't seem to help it, can't seem to break out of it, as if it were fore-ordained, dictated by a rigid and implacable codemaker that she is too weak to defy. She doesn't trust me any more; she can't say the things she used to say, talk about the old subjects, the books, the movies, the men. We used to discuss men in front of Chris and Peter and they would love it, winking at each other, secure, confident.

When the rain stopped we came out of the trees. Water fell on us from the branches when we jarred them. We came into a field. Trees were thick on three sides of it. The side opposite to that from which we emerged sloped away to the water. The sky was a big space then, not like in the woods when it had been little grey irregular fragments like a dusty lead-veined window. It was still mostly grey overhead but bright blue far away over the water. Sun came down through the breaks in the clouds in even,

straight-planed shafts. Peter's arm was tight around my shoulder, his fist hairy and black next to my cheek.

"My feet are wet," I said.

The grass was long and bent and tangled around my ankles. Peter lifted me up and carried me toward the slope. I was laughing. His arms were tight behind my back and under my knees. He slipped and I fell to the ground, rolling in the wet grass. He was laughing, too. His face came between me and the sky, his new mustache matted and dripping muddy water. His body was tight against me. My face was in his mustache, writhing for air, the gritty water coarse on my skin and in my nostrils. The uneven ground arched my back, wet and slippery, sliding against it, my head wrenching from side to side for breathing space, my fingers grasping his shirt, pulling him tight against my body.

After, we left our clothes in the field and plunged down the slope into the water. He disappeared under it and splashed up laughing and shaking his head.

"You're purple," he said.

It was the coldest water I've ever been in.

The first time after I came home was impossible. Peter was ~~sorry~~ but he wasn't angry. And the second time,

too, and the time after that. Finally, he stopped trying but he never said anything and rarely questioned me about it. He was afraid to start something, to provoke an unpredictable response. I stopped being ashamed, it took a while, but I stopped. It doesn't even seem important now. It might become important again, but now it isn't. I think we are coming to see things differently now, to accept our being together as just that, being together, with a tacit agreement not to create irreconcilable disturbances, to make things as easy as possible, to never endanger our being together by establishing unshiftable postures. We don't have to say anything, we don't have to worry about creating or stumbling into unyielding situations--we know how to maneuver.

"Christ, I can hardly move" Chris says, gripping his belly with both hands and supressing with obvious difficulty the series of burps that try to escape his throat.

"I know what you mean," Debbie says.

"Let's go inside and play some cards," Peter says.

"Somebody call me a taxi," Chris says.

"You'll need a bus," Debbie says, slapping him on the stomach.

"That's it for me," Chris says. I'm never eating again."

Catherine Herold

After shopping--I buy nothing in the end; there is nothing to buy, no ornamentation fixes my desire, no necessity arouses my sensibility of need--I stop for a drink at a Mexican cabaret. Here is a planned exoticism, a removal from place that constitutes a denial of purpose. The other-world motif: you are never where you are, where you expected to be, sans place, sans espoir, sans peur.

Cynthia and Peter are having company and I want to stay away. Discourse with strangers: how are you, Madame? Je ne sais pas. I feel it coming on, a desire to get dizzy and not to think, to be absorbed by something, indulge a compulsion, go a little crazy.

But not yet.

Compulsion to solitude: to detach oneself from obligation. Another person is always a question that one is expected to answer. I want to drink a daquiri, hear some music, get some sleep, ignore myself. To ignore is to be ignorant. Everything is a definition of something else.

A man at the next table tries to pick me up. Maybe that's an exaggeration, an assumption of duplicity. He talks to me about fish: whales and sharks.

"The best way to deal with sharks," he says, "is to punch them right on the tip of the nose. It's true. You hit them on the nose and they'll run away. They have very sensitive noses."

Where does it come from, this information, and why is he telling me? In fact, he has been listening to a conversation at another table, where a man and woman are discussing the movie Jaws. It is their conversation he is entering, snatching it from them and transferring it to me. This establishes complicity: we have been eavesdropping and have something to share.

He seems to be in his mid-thirties, dark, not quite savory, perhaps. We talk a while. He says he's a pilot with Al Italia. It doesn't take me very long to get bored. He moves to my table, where he sits, very much at ease, leaning back with one knee crossed over the other. Eventually, he gets around to telling me I look unhappy. This is the moment of shifting, for in order to penetrate me, to make himself indispensable, at least temporarily, he must engage my afflictions.

"Your husband doesn't love you."

"I think he does."

"Then you don't love him?"

"I think I do."

"Then he doesn't sleep with you."

"You really don't know what it is, do you?"

"Why don't you tell me."

"It isn't worth the trouble."

That was Bill's answer to a question of mine: why don't we have children? It was a question of delay: another year, a little more money, a bigger place. Any day now, until it was too late. Then it wasn't worth the trouble anymore.

The dark man buys me a drink.

"Don't get drunk on me," he says.

He's a scavenger, this one, mistaking me for carrion.

"No thanks." I push the glass toward him.

"I don't drink daquiris," he says, pushing it back.

His fingernails are well-manicured, with perfectly rounded tips. His hands give off a whiff of cologne. He has obviously gone to some trouble to prepare himself for the unknown.

C'est moi, l'inconnu. He wants to find out, to discover and reveal. To explore is to expropriate. Nothing is innocent, that is, only itself. I am to be dispossessed of what I think I own: secrets, detachment, will. Uncovered, I will melt in the sun like a surprised vampire.

"What else don't you do?" I say.

"I don't stay where I'm not wanted."

"You're still here."

"Because I know I'm wanted."

"Oh, really?"

"Oh, really."

The mariachis move among the tables, playing requests. They move in our direction.

"I can't hear through the noise," I say.

He smiles at me.

I was five years old. Under the kitchen balcony behind the house I had carved a home. Two dolls lived there. Their names were Simone and Esthère. Simone had black cheeks and no nose; Esthère had only one leg. They fought continuously. Simone usually won by kicking Esthère's one leg out from under her. Sometimes Esthère won by poking her hand into the cavity in Simone's face.

My mother was heavy handed. I was lucky to have a second home under the porch. When my mother was angry, all the neighbors knew it.

"Why don't you go on the radio, 'ostie," my father would say, and that would be loud, too.

One day I was under the porch waiting for dark; in the dark everything was better. My mother was shouting for me to come inside. Esthère's hand was in Simone's face. They interlocked, these two cripples, like complementary parts of speech. I was singing:

"Je n'entends pas, je n'entends pas."

"Laisse-faire, Clothilde," My father said. "J'ai bèn faim."

I was hungry, too, but that day I was free.

I turn to the dark man. He has been studying me, watching closely to analyze my facial expressions: the way I lift my eyebrows, shift my eyes, bite or purse my lips.

"Do you have any family?" I ask him.

He makes a waving motion with one hand, dropping ashes on his pants from the cigarette he has taken from my pack and lighted with my lighter. He has ceased to regard me; he now alternates between looking around the room and staring at a spot on his knee. It occurs to me that there is nothing interesting about this man; he has no immediately striking quirks, nothing that can be caricatured. And his confidence is as boring as his blandness. He lacks the complexity that one infers from displays of fleeting weakness.

"No parents? No brothers, no sisters?"

"In Italy. Why?"

"Where in Italy?"

"Somewhere in Naples."

"Where in Naples?"

"Have you ever been to Naples?"

"No."

"It's a big place."

Bill always wanted a home where he could find it; but he gave the impression of never wanting to find anyone else in it. It was something he needed without wanting to need it. He always worked to avoid discovery, to delay revelation. It's more trouble than it's worth. There are facts to conceal facts, as the past conceals the present. Now we face ourselves and are surprised.

Paul Bradley

By six o'clock I have emptied the garbage bins, vacuumed the corridors, exterminated a group of maggots in the basement and settled down for a quiet evening of renting out rooms. Alan comes in around eight, although it is his day off. He sits by the desk and lays out his paraphernalia: tobacco tin (Three Nuns), pipe (the bowl so thickly encrusted that there is barely room for a finger to pack it), tobacco pouch (Gitane), rolling papers (Export), rolling machine, harmonica, flick-knife (six-inch blade). He wants to talk about poetry (he likes Yeats, I don't), drugs ("there's no such thing as mescaline in Montreal any more"), England (live beer, ultra-short cigarettes, skinheads, pub hours, and especially Cambridge), chess (he has recently acquired a Russian clock), my sex life (criminally dishonest), his old girlfriend (he occasionally goes out to the west end to stare at the house she lives in), and divers other topics to which I pay less than full attention. Our literary ambitions receive their due; he succinctly sums up his position vis-à-vis my current project: "Actually, I don't think a long poem on Hannibal has much chance of being very good, with all due respect."

We went to the Hunter's Horn one night so Alan could hear some Irish music. At a table near the door, a middle-aged man in a blue Pepsi-Cola uniform seemed to be sleeping; his head was thin and a thin brown mustache lay straight across his face like a wound over which the blood has dried; his head jerked forward periodically and then fell back again as he struggled with his fatigue.

We found a place at the bar and ordered beer. The woman at my left was staring into her drink. Her companion was talking to a greying man in a grey suit, who said: "I'm an account director. I handle about ten million dollars right now." The woman he was talking to nodded her head; she had short blonde hair and very large cheeks.

"What's this place like?" Alan said to me.

"It's alright."

The bartender said something to the woman next to me and she smiled weakly. I looked around the room. At the end of the bar was a small dance floor and next to that a tiny stage with two microphones. A man and a woman were standing on it and they began to sing an Irish folk song. A few couples were dancing. A chubby bald

man asked the woman next to me if she wanted to dance; she shook her head and resumed her examination of her glass.

"You're beginning to look tragic," I said to her.

I hadn't expected her to respond but she looked up and grinned. "Am I really?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, I didn't want to dance with him."

"Where are you from?"

"Albany."

"Really? How long have you been here?"

"Two days."

"Like it?"

"It's a beautiful city."

"What do you do in Albany?"

"I'm a schoolteacher."

"Really? What do you teach?"

"Rhythm."

"Rhythm?"

"Yes. Body movement, that kind of thing. We put on a play with fourth-graders last month. They were really good."

"Your friend is a teacher, too?"

"Yes. She teaches English."

"Really? My friend here is a writer." I turned to Alan and took his arm. "What's your name?"

"Amy."

"Amy, I'm Paul and this is the illustrious Alan."

"Hello," Alan said.

"Is he really a writer?"

"Sure."

"He doesn't look it."

"Not lean and hungry enough, eh? First he must learn starvation. His profession has been kind to him."

"Do you make a living writing?"

"Not yet," Alan said.

"What do you do for a living?"

"He's a white slaver," I said.

"What do you do?" Amy asked me.

"I'm a philosopher."

"What's your philosophy?"

"You live until you die."

"Very philosophical."

"I used to be a priest."

Alan looked at Amy. "Tell me a story about death."

"What?"

"A story. About death. I'm trying to find out about it."

"Why?"

"So I can write a book."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a writer."

"Are you really a writer?"

"Don't get him started," I said.

"What have you written?" she said.

"Poetry, mostly."

"Oh? What kind of poetry?"

"What kinds are there?"

"I don't know," she said. "What kind is yours?"

"Good," I said.

"What?"

"Good poetry. If you like that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"Poetry."

"I like it if it's good."

"How can you tell if it's good?"

"Well, I don't know. I think most of it's boring."

"Everything's boring."

"Then why go on?"

"We are anesthetized," Alan announced, "by the will to survive."

Suddenly the account director was standing next to him. "I don't believe you're a writer."

"Why don't you believe it?" Alan said.

"I don't believe it," the man repeated defiantly. He stood very straight with one large hand wrapped around a glass; he seemed about to crush it as if it were a telegram carrying bad news.

"I don't give a fuck what you believe," Alan said.

"Hey, he's getting mad now," the man said to me.

"I don't blame him," I said.

"Doesn't make it true," the man said. He walked away. As he passed the sleeping man in the Pepsi uniform he reached over and shook him by the shoulder. The Pepsi man woke up and immediately reached for his glass.

"Son of a bitch," I said.

"Oh, never mind," Alan said.

The singers were back on the stage; they started to sing "Black Velvet Band." Alan lay one hand across my shoulder and the other across Amy's and said with great deliberation: "You are all a Pepsi generation."

Pinky, wearing a spectacular wig, comes in with a scrawny unshaven man in a cloth jacket. "Hey, baby, what's happening?" she says, slapping the counter. She has a booming voice that makes Alan cringe.

"Not much," I say.

"How 'bout a room?"

I hand her a registration slip; she signs it "Richard Nixon" and hands it back.

"Twelve bucks," I say.

"Give him twelve dollars," she says to the man.

"Twelve? I never pay more than ten." He puts a ten-dollar bill on the counter.

"It's twelve," I say.

"No, it isn't."

"Give him his money," Pinky says, hitting his arm. She is a big girl.

The man puts a two-dollar bill on the counter; I take it and give him a key. Pinky grabs it from his hand and leads him upstairs.

"See you later," she says.

Candy comes in as I am marking the amount on the account sheet. "You seen Pinky?"

"She just went up."

"You see that motherfucker she was with? He's no fucking good. Told me thirty was too much. What's she going with him for?"

"I don't know."

"Shit, I'm going to bed."

"What was I saying?" Alan says.

"I don't remember.. You were talking about books, or something."

"Oh, right. You don't seem to have the same taste as I do at all. Very perverse, you are."

Pinky's trick comes downstairs; he stops at the desk. "Let me ask you something," he says. "How come all these girls are black?"

"I don't know. They come from New York."

"Shit, the hell with it." He walks out.

"Strange guy," I say.

"Nothing wrong with that," Alan says. "Sometimes it's good to make other people think you're strange. I never thought that I was particularly strange, although I have occasionally admitted to being a poet."

"Sometimes it can be politic to reveal a secret vice," I say.

Chris Watson

I play the ace of clubs.

Debbie smokes, placidly; Peter is twisting his mouth around, concentrating; Cynthia sits looking at her cards spread out on the table away from her, adjusting one now and then to keep the suits in perfectly aligned rows.

The Christmas the four of us went to Miami Beach we went like any other tourists, staying in one of the Collins Avenue motels. The beach was a narrow strip of sand blackened by tar and seaweed; some days it was dotted blue with jellyfish; the water was a dirty green.

Peter and Debbie spent most of the time reading in deck chairs by the pool. Periodically, Peter would execute a dive, swim a few lengths and then return to his book. Cynthia would wander off for hours, walking up and down the beach. One morning she decided to walk from Sunny Isles to Bal Harbor, a considerable distance, and she asked me if I wanted to go along. We set off about ten-thirty, dodging the blue snaky strands of the half-buried jellyfish, and reached the pier in about twenty minutes.

"Down two," Peter says. "A hundred above for you."

Debbie is already dealing from the red deck.

"How about some music, Peter?" Cynthia says.

"What's your choice?" Peter says.

"Oh, anything."

The doctor came in and looked gravely at Peter.

"She'll be alright."

"Thank God," Peter said.

"There was nothing we could do about the baby, I'm afraid."

"I suppose it couldn't be helped."

"There'll be a next time, Mr. Bradley."

"I don't think she'll want to go through a next time."

"She's a very sensitive woman."

"I guess I'm aware of that," Peter said.

I make five clubs on the next hand.

"One hundred even," Peter says, keeping score. He likes the perfection of numbers, the finality, the incontrovertibility of an elegant proof. Logic is his refuge; falling back on it is, for him, like coming home to his own living room where every piece of furniture is in the right, familiar place.

Peter took his B.A. in math and philosophy. It took him a long time; his concentration usually broke down toward the end of the year. He would pile up his books on the floor of his room and forget about them. I called on him one night with a bottle of wine he had asked me to bring over for one of his girlfriends.

"You're just in time," he said.

I noticed the books on the floor and I knew what he meant. "Packing it in?"

"I'll get back to them."

"You've only got a month to go."

"I need a break. Let's see that wine."

I handed him the bottle.

"Italian," he said. "Good for gulping." He started to peel the foil from around the cork.

"I thought it was supposed to be for your date tomorrow."

"She can bring her own wine."

"You're a wonderful host."

"Cynthia's very understanding. Cynthia Perry, the art student."

"Oh, yes, sweet Cyn."

"Oh, yes.

We drank the bottle and then went out to a few clubs and got drunk. Toward closing time we met two girls who were going to a party with some guy and they asked us along. It turned out to be a gay party somewhere out near Christophe Colomb. I thought I was getting in good with one of the girls; the four of us left together but as soon as we got outside the two girls ran ahead of us.

"Where are they going?" Peter asked me.

"I don't know." I started to chase them. Peter was walking behind, shaking his head.

"Where are you going?" he shouted after me.

I caught up with the girls and tried to talk to them. They wouldn't stop walking.

"What's going on?" Peter said, catching up.

"They won't listen to me."

"I guess they don't like us."

"Goddamn it, at least they could stop and listen when I talk to them."

One of the girls, a redhead, stopped. She looked completely drunk and confused. "You want to come to our place?" she asked Peter.

"Sure."

Her friend grabbed her arm and dragged her along.

"The hell with them," I said.

"Wait a minute, she just invited us over."

"The hell with the bitches."

"Come on," Peter said. "Here's a cab."

"Where are we going?"

"Just get in."

It was dawn; as soon as we got in the cab, it started to rain.

"Let's go see Julie," he said.

The record finishes. Peter gets up and turns it over.

"What's the score?" Debbie asks.

"Both vulnerable," Cynthia says, examining the pad.

"And you have three-fifty above. Would you like some more coffee?"

"Please," Debbie says.

When we reached the pier there was a crowd of people in bathing suits standing around. They all seemed to be looking at something on the edge of the sand. We stopped but we couldn't see anything over all the heads. I turned to the man next to me.

"What's going on?"

He shrugged. "Search me." He only had one hand; he tried to keep the stump of his other arm in the pocket of his terrycloth jacket but it kept slipping out.

We tried to push our way through the crowd but Cynthia was having a hard time so we stopped. Everyone around us was asking what was going on but no one up front seemed inclined to answer.

"The hell with it," I said. "Let's go on."

"It's a baby," somebody said.

"What is it, a fish?"

"It looks like a dead baby."

Debbie bids the next hand more competitively than usual. Peter opens a spade and she says two no. Cynthia passes. I know Debbie is weak in high cards and I only have six points so Peter must have a monster. I pass to him and he says three hearts. Debbie bids three no-trump. Cynthia jumps in with four hearts and I pass. Peter ponders his hand for several minutes, apparently considering his slam possibilities. Finally he passes. Debbie immediately bids four no-trump. I re-evaluate my hand: a king, two jacks and a doubleton in spades--still six points and the doubleton is worthless. I'm glad we aren't playing for money.

Debbie looks at me. Peter ponders again, shaking his head. He doubles.

I shake my head at Debbie.

"I couldn't let him have it that easily," she says.

I lay down my hand; Peter laughs.

"I should have gone to six," he says.

"It's a good sacrifice," Debbie says. "Don't you think so, Chris?"

Debbie came into the store wearing a red dress with matching jacket. She took a folded piece of paper from her purse and handed it to me.

The prescription was signed by my brother: a J, a W, and a squiggle. His office was upstairs; he kept my pharmacy alive.

She came back in exactly two weeks. This time she smiled and said hello.

"Hello." I said. "Back for a refill?"

"Yes. I hope this is the last one."

"Have you been seeing Dr. Watson long?"

"Just a couple of weeks."

I handed her a tube of pills. "I'll be sure and have him prescribe you a weekly dose of placebos." I gave her my best smile. "Just to keep you in the neighborhood."

She smiled back.

The worst fight we ever had I blame on liquor. We had some people in and after they left we were carrying the glasses and ashtrays back to the kitchen. I was exceptionally drunk.

"These are cheap glasses," I said.

"Just try not to break them."

"It's the cheapest ones that are the strongest. They wouldn't break even if I did drop them."

"Don't start experimenting."

"Watch." I held out a glass at arm's length.

"Don't break it, Chris."

"It won't break on this floor. The linoleum's all soft and buckled. How much do you want to bet it won't break?"

"I'll bet you ten dollars it breaks," she said impatiently.

"I haven't got ten bucks."

"Five then."

"I don't have five. I don't have five cents, to tell you the truth."

"Then put it away and forget it."

"I tell you what. If it breaks, I'll wash the dishes for a week."

"Alright, fine."

"Okay." I held out the glass again.

"And you'll clean up the broken glass, too," she said.

"Ah, I didn't say that." I dropped the glass; it smashed into pieces.

"Ha," she said.

"Hell, I really didn't expect that to happen."

"Why didn't you believe me?"

"Look at that floor. It shouldn't have broken."

"Well, you better clean it up."

I got out a broom and a dustpan and swept up the broken glass. Bending down and standing up made me dizzy. I stumbled to the garbage bag in the corner of the room, trying to fight off nausea and vertigo.

"Look at yourself," Debbie said.

"I'm fine."

I reached the bag and turned to face her. "What's the matter with you?"

"With me? What's the matter with you?"

"I said I'm fine."

I tried to turn back to the bag but the space was too narrow. I fell backwards and flattened it. I started to

laugh but I was choking. I couldn't stand up; my hands were limp on the floor, surrounded by broken glass and scattered garbage. I couldn't raise my head to see Debbie's reaction. She was shouting something at me, shaking me, trying to pull me up. I closed my eyes and blocked her out.

I managed to get up a little while later. I heard noises from the living room and went to investigate. Debbie was smashing the place up; there were books all over the floor and chairs were upturned; she had thrown the coffee table against the wall. She picked up a metal statuette and aimed at the TV.

"Not at the TV," I said.

She threw the statuette in my direction. "Goddamn you," she said. "I don't have to live like this. I don't have to take this from you."

I ducked and it hit the wall behind me. I watched her calmly. "Take what from me?"

"I'll smash this whole goddamn place. You want to live like a fucking animal here's your fucking chance."

The next day when I woke up I was alone. I looked into the kitchen; it had been cleaned up. I was afraid to see what the living room looked like but, it had been carefully straightened as well. The coffee table was pretty scratched and one of its legs wobbled. There was

a note on it: "Dear Chris, I've gone to work. Please defrost something for supper. Remember to put the phone back on the hook. Love, Debbie."

It was the first year of our marriage, before we bought out our nerves with sudden money.

I can't argue with the way she plays the hand. She loses two high diamonds, then Peter runs five spades. He leads a heart to Cynthia but Debbie surprises him with the king. She lays down the last four diamonds.

"Down five," Peter says. "Doubled vulnerable. Fourteen hundred for us, plus fifty for insult."

"At least I kept you from winning," Debbie says.

"Not really," Peter says. "You only delayed it. Even if you make game this hand you'll have just over a thousand. We have over fifteen hundred. Fifteen-twenty, to be exact. You can't win unless you put us down a few times."

"You and your damn math," Cynthia says. She smiles. "Never play games with an accountant."

"It's not over yet," I say. "We can still put you down."

"You can try," Peter says.

"It's no fun if you can't win." Cynthia says.

"We can win," I say.

Cynthia looked stunned. "What did he say?"

"I didn't hear him," I said.

"He said something about a baby. A dead baby."

"Did he? No, it couldn't be."

"It's all blue," somebody said.

"It's probably just an overgrown jellyfish," I said.

"Let's keep walking."

"He said it was a dead baby," she said.

"My God, it's all blue," a woman said.

"Come on, Cynthia, let's go back."

"Watch those stingers," a man said.

I took her by the arm and led her back to the motel.

"You know how people are," I said. "Especially in a crowd. Nobody knows what they're talking about." I tried a smile. "Communication entropy."

She looked up. "Look at those clouds. It'll probably rain all day."

Just running from the cab to the building we got soaked.

"Oh, God," Julie said. "What are you doing here?"

"We were lonely," Peter said. "We thought we'd visit you."

"Sorry," I said. "We shouldn't have come."

"It's alright," she said. "Just let me wake up."

"Chris had a fight in the street with two drunken girls," Peter said.

"What?"

"Two girls who took us to a party," I said. "It, wasn't a fight, it's just that they left us there in the rain. I lost my temper, that's all."

"He really took it hard," Peter said. He sat next to me on the couch.

"I haven't seen you in weeks and now you come over at this hour," Julie said. "Why haven't you called me?"

"I've been studying," Peter said.

"So, Chris, how have you been? I haven't heard from you in a long time either."

"I'm fine," I said. "I've decided to go back to school next year."

"In what?"

"Either medicine or architecture."

Peter laughed. "I like a man who can make up his mind."

We got into a minor wrestling match which ended when I upended him and threw him off the couch.

"Take it easy," Julie said. "Jesus Christ, it's seven in the morning, did you come here to break up my apartment?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "We shouldn't have come."

"Just take it easy," she said. "Sit down."

"I guess I better go," I said.

"What's your hurry?" she said. "Sit down, you just got here."

"Yeah, stick around a while," Peter said.

"No, I'm going."

"Well, give me a call," Peter said.

"Take care," Julie said. She kissed me at the door.

I walked home in the rain and slept all day.

Peter was in the pool when Cynthia and I got back.

"It looks like rain," Debbie said.

"If it does we'll go into Miami and find something to do," I said.

Peter was standing on the diving board.

"Look at that husband of yours," I said to Cynthia.

"Showing off again, Peter?"

Debbie deals the next hand from the red deck. I look at my cards; I hold five spades to the jack, the ace of clubs, and the queen of hearts: seven points. My fighting spirit is considerably diminished.

Catherine Herold

The dark man takes me home, to his home, somewhere in St. Michel, in the upper part of a duplex that is furnished like a hotel room. Everything is orderly and cheap, vulgar without being gaudy. He gives me a glass of cognac.

It is impossible not to talk. He says nothing, but he listens, smiling benevolently. I ignore everything but the shape of his mouth, bent in a U. I am at a loss to explain to myself the source of the flow of words, for I am embarrassed by what I am saying but unable to stop myself. I tell him my life, which is apparently what he expects to hear; so, although he is barely participating in this flawed interaction, it is he who dominates.

Eventually, he comes to join me on the couch, casually slipping his arm behind my back. I am indifferent to this nonchalant aggression; presumably, he is not listening very closely to what I am saying, but then neither am I paying much attention to what he is doing. I try to adjust a crooked lampshade with my stare. The dark man's face is on my neck.

Bill and I had no secret game.

It now seems to me remarkable that we have done nothing in our lives together that we would be ashamed to reveal or to have discovered. Even alone we were always in public.

Peter told me soon after I moved into his house that of all the years he and Cynthia had been married, he couldn't think of one that had been truly happy. We commiserated for several hours. This is what I now do best.

He put his hand over mine and I looked into his face. Some charm was there and some innocence, and he looked very sad, but it was an accepted sadness. More than that: it was axiomatic. He needed it like a child needs a mother: for nourishment, protection and somewhere to go.

Cynthia's son Paul did not make her happy but he did not make her crazy--une folle. Her son David made her crazy and, in a way, that made her happy. He made her crazy because he did not want to come out of the dark, or maybe she did not want him to. Being crazy--thought of as crazy--made her happy because it made her free; now she was no longer responsible. Peter tried to make her responsible again which made her unhappy. So I assume that what love there is between them must be based upon their dependence on this drama. Most rational bonds, it seems, freely entered, tend to dissolve into separateness unless they are

reinforced by an irrational element. If there is something to act out, some private theatre or secret game, the relationship is cemented by the couple's mutual need, their dependence on the shared secret.


The dark man is angry.

"All you do is feel sorry for yourself," he says.

"Don't you think other people have problems? What makes you so special? I know a hundred women like you. The world is full of martyrs."

"What kind of problems can you possibly have?"

"I have to sit here and listen to this shit."

"I don't."

Outside, I am confused by the unfamiliar neighborhood.

Alan Sahsavar

I define myself by what surrounds me.

That is, I first define a place, which coordinately defines my position within it, so that, in effect, I know what I am by where I am, or, more precisely, by remembering where I have been. I can define the kind of person I am by the kind of places I have thought of as home, although this is not to say that I am the sum of my experiences. My experiences have been happenings, not shapers; I am that to which they happened, for I was already something before they happened, that something being circumscribed by a locus with which I identified or from which I distanced myself. In short, I am myself alone, as Richard III put it (or as Shakespeare put it into his mouth), but I have discovered that it is in my self-interest to determine exactly where my existence is taking place at any given moment or period of my life, not merely that I may persevere or triumph, but that I may define myself congruously, or, briefly, stay sane (briefly, for I suppose that's the best one can hope for).

This may all be lies, or merely nonsense. One searches for truth (the search is meaning) and therefore values precision. But precision often leads to confusion, for as one's analyses expand they often engulf the extraneous and spurious. The truth, after all, may be no more than a

sum of tangents, where the core itself (that part which one originally assumed represented the goal) is hollow, or unapproachable, beyond our capacity to assimilate or comprehend. (This could lead, of course, to a discussion of divine versus human truth, revealed versus discovered, but perhaps it is unnecessary to pursue that here). Precision, then, can be labyrinthine, which leaves the way open for perpetual doubt, which is why I observe that it may be nonsense; I do not really think that it is lies. But if the core be hollow, is the search for it still valid? Are the tangents sufficiently meaningful in themselves to warrant investigation?

A second proposition: there is a hole in the center of reality.

Is this hole our own frailty, that is, the incomplete evolution of our capacity for knowledge? Is it a flaw in the structure of the universe that we will not call a flaw because that is the easy way out? I am inclined to think that it is death, which is applicable to both interpretations (and others that I have not listed), but that is undoubtably due to a flaw in myself, a personal fixation, if you will, my own easy way out. Oh, I know it. I do not love it, although the thought of it has occasionally consoled me. Nor am I interested in attaining it (what sort of achievement is it, after all).

Furthermore, I know for a fact, insofar as I am capable of systematic ratiocination, which I believe myself, in all modesty, eminently to be, that the idea of death (and it can never be more than an idea to the living) has no place in a well thought-out theory of truth. But there it is, in medias res (perhaps a misuse of the phrase), and since the hole cannot be defined in any terms at all, then any terms at all will probably do. Nor will the numerous tangents suffice to define it, for they are of the thing itself and not the place that surrounds it (if "place" can describe so abstract a terrain). Moreover, however absurd these reflections may under scrutiny prove to be, the fact remains, and whatever else I may repudiate, I will never recant it, that there is, definitely, as I say, a hole in the center of reality.

The question arises (to get back to what I started to say), whether I can in fact be properly defined as I am now by my present surroundings. At the moment, I am sitting in the lobby (such as it is: a small counter, a switchboard, a soft-drink machine, a seedy couch and a dilapidated coffee table) of a thirty-unit rooming house that was initially founded to provide shelter for homosexual tourists and which quickly found its true metier in furnishing bed and sink to prostitutes who,

for one reason or another, all appear to be black New Yorkers. I do not think that this very successfully defines me, but then, one's immediate surroundings are much too ephemeral to be considered in vacuo. To extend further: I am in Montreal and have been for almost two years, but despite my familiarity with what one might call the real underbelly of the city I do not believe that I truly qualify as a Montrealer in the same way that Paul Bradley does, for example, or Jacques Chénard. I have dug out a sort of home here, however, and I suppose that to some extent aspects of this place qua place can be cited in establishing my identity. Not that there is any crisis involved, or search for identity per se; I am not "looking for myself" or "trying to find myself" or any such rubbish as that; I am merely trying to clarify exactly what I am (even as opposed to who I am) out of interest (not desperation), just as one might wish to explore one's genealogy, for the sake of edification (and even pleasure), not out of any particular need. Although I am an alien in this country, I have managed to surmount whatever postpubescent feelings of alienation (in an existential sense) I may have at one time experienced. I am pursuing this, let us say, purely for the fun of it.

To get on: I suppose I must include Cambridge among ~~the~~ premises of my being (nothing metaphysical intended, or even particularly philosophical, for that matter); Leicester no longer really enters into it, being no more than a place of birth, a domicile for parents and some former friends, etc. One anecdote (hardly that; one tiny incident) may be relevant: when I was in secondary school, I was sitting in my room one day pondering something or other when my mother came in and asked me what I was doing. "Thinking," I said, to which she rather forcefully replied, "Oh, that's nothing. Why don't you go out and do something?" This had an echo of sorts when I was getting ready to leave school. In an interview with one of my masters, who had summoned me to criticize my lack of enthusiasm for field sports and other approved diversions, the following vilification was (rather absurdly, I thought) levelled at me: "The trouble with you, Sansavar, is you're too damned intellectual." I do not think that I have ever been so vehemently flattered.

Cambridge I remember very fondly as, I suppose, the best time of my life. I never went to lectures much, but I saw most of my professors once a week for private consultations and I did attend (and rather dominated) most seminars. I graduated with a third, but then, their

standards are extremely rigorous; Winston Churchill took a fourth, I believe. I remember the usual things that one tends to remember from university (dinners at Queen's College, drinking parties, friendships, that sort of thing) with none of the displeasure that a great deal of my more recent memories engender. Although I can hardly state unequivocally that I was perfectly happy, I was never really particularly unhappy until I came to this country, and I still have not quite allocated full responsibility for that yet (my unhappiness, that is). At times I assume full blame, but such moments of preternatural nobility are generally rare in anyone; on the other hand, I am perhaps uncommonly loathe to assume even that degree of responsibility which is indisputably mine, for I have always had a tendency to be rather defensive about things I take seriously, and I take relationships all too seriously (I thus reveal, with improper introduction, the chief source of whatever misery I have experienced in recent times, although other causes are manifest--penury not least among them.)

The girl in question is named Diane, and I must emphatically decline to discuss her in any detail. Suffice it to say that she exposed me to my own incipient madness (my family is traditionally somewhat dotty) and

led me out of myself to the performance of two acts of uncharacteristic violence. The first, inspired by a jealously ignited by an in flagrante delicto situation, involved my threatening her with a knife (although these threats were never intended to be executed); the second, and more dangerous of the two, was a barely aborted suicide attempt, from which I was timely rescued by Paul, although I do not doubt that I would have survived it anyway (sometimes, in fact, I am rather peeved at his interference, but in general I suppose I'm grateful).

To sum up, then: it seems my initial premise was something of a misapprehension and that I am not actually to be defined by my surroundings, for I can find no coherent pattern of definition which adequately expresses what I am. I have tried to entrench myself in the world in an apropos manner but it apparently defies analysis. Perhaps that is what the hole in the center really means: I am it. I suppose I might be mistaken, but in all fairness I must say that I suspected as much all along. After all, what is ever certain? Certainly our premises must always be open to doubt; which leads, alas, to a rather unfortunate question, or a question which suggests an unfortunate answer: why must there be a center at all?

Paul shakes my arm with somewhat more force than I feel is necessary; nevertheless, I am glad of the contact.

"You're alive," he says.

"Loosely speaking."

And the reverie, or rumination, or abandonment of externals goes on.

I think my mind works like this (being very stoned at the moment it is both more accelerated and more acute than usual; at least it discerns a pattern that seems reasonable enough): first, I make a statement (or conceive one); then I analyse that statement; then I analyse the analysis; then I analyse the analysis of the analysis; and so on, ad tedium. The last qualification (expressed in Latin, an altogether less offensive language) I deduce from the reactions of those whom I subject (I am not generally given to such self-castigating comments or choices of verb, but nevertheless) to this pattern in conversation. However, and I am adamant on this point, I believe that precision is crucial and not easily achieved; nor do I find the struggle to be perfectly precise necessarily boring, particularly.

So there.

I have often suspected myself of self-hatred but cannot state with any certainty whether in fact I am guilty of it or not. I have rarely found myself insufferable, although I have often despised weaknesses that with overt strenuousness overpowered me. A failure to associate, I think is what I most deplore. By that I mean an inability to be socially adroit, to get along with people properly. This is the only thing in fact that I may desire more than literary success. And yet, I have allowed myself at times to participate only as observer, which is rather more superfluous than I generally like to be.

Sly comes in and produces a pint of scotch. I in turn offer him some smoke if he can roll it; my machine is handy but unfortunately I lack the dexterity at the moment to utilize it.

"Hey, you guys stoned or something?"

"Who us?" Paul says, not without difficulty.

"Shit."

He sits in a chair by the window. The switchboard buzzes and it strikes me that it has not done so all evening, an extremely rare occurrence. Paul says okay into the phone and then rings a room upstairs.

"That Lee?"

Apparently.

"Sheila's coming in about five minutes." He unplugs the switch.

Lee comes downstairs looking as though he just got out of bed: his feet bare, his shirt unbuttoned, his usually carefully coiffed hair bedraggled. He collapses on the couch on the other side of the room and Sly goes over to join him. Paul and I get through another joint.

Sheila comes in with a trick and goes upstairs; she and Lee have rented a room for the week, although it is unusual for any of the girls to use their regular room for tricking. As a rule, they will make the trick rent another one for the fifteen minutes they usually spend in it.

Sheila and Lee, however, are an especially ignorant couple; for one thing, he has to get up and come downstairs every time she brings someone back.

Pinky comes in with her second of the night. She is the brassiest of them all and can be thoroughly irritating sometimes. Paul gives her the room next to the desk. He is very stoned himself and can hardly write it up on the account sheet; finally he abandons the idea, hands me six dollars and pockets six himself.

"What the hell, let's order supper."

We call the Silvery Moon Cafe; he orders a mini-dinner of egg rolls, pineapple chicken (toads and cats' paws to me) and fried rice; I select barbecued chicken. I don't like to order from the Chinese place but Paul won't eat anything from the Indian place I discovered one night. They sent me a plate of curry on a real plate, delivered by a young boy on a bicycle. It was all very quaint.

Sly (who moved here at Paul's suggestion, to the annoyance of the owner who was trying to reduce by a slow process of attrition the number of pimps who live here permanently) comes over and offers us some cocaine. I remember the last time we did his coke but that doesn't stop me from accepting.

Paul was getting ready to close up and he was already drunk. I had done three caps of so-called mescaline and was in good shape. Paul was seeing a girl named Sylvie that week and she came to pick him up. The three of us ended up at the Limelight, which I can only describe as hell (my state of mind at the time, exacerbated by the drugs I had ingested must have contributed to my negative experience, although I don't care much for

disco music at the best of times). At one point I was very embarrassingly crawling around on the floor (it was very crowded), fighting despair, lost in the hole in the center of reality, out of touch completely. I managed to make my way to where Paul and Sylvie were sitting on a kind of divan and draped my arms over his knees. (This was one of the minor incidents that contributed to the rumor, prevalent a few months ago, that I was in love with him, a contention that I most emphatically deny; as I have said on many occasions, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, I don't fancy men in bed.) I wanted to be taken care of, consoled, rescued, plucked from the hell of the throbbing bass that was externalizing my desperation.

We arrived at my place at dawn. Paul (exhausted, but straight and sober) and Sylvie sat on the steps and smoked cigarettes. I paced the sidewalk in unutterable anguish (to coin a cliché, but what else can I call it?), ranting (again I deprecate myself, but I cannot argue with the accuracy of the verb) about my usual concerns (truth, death, the impossibility of knowledge, the impossibility of life). Paul tried to cheer me up, or at least tolerated my despairing lament, but he was obviously too tired to sustain the ordeal. Eventually, I gave up and

started walking around the block. I noticed Paul following me about half a block back and I suddenly felt secure. I expected to do something stupid, for I had resolved that the world was a fairly stupid place, but with him following me there seemed little chance of endangering myself. When I got to Dorchester a taxi came by and I got into it.

The next morning I woke up in the garage of Diane's building, having evidently spent the night (such as was left of it) on the concrete floor. I was awakened by Jerry, one of the people with whom she shared the flat, and I asked if I could see her. He told me she had already gone, as it was past noon, and would I mind leaving. I didn't know where she could be (it was Sunday) but I had succeeded, at least, in achieving so abject a humiliation that I was momentarily relieved of whatever death-wish I may have been harboring. I felt dirty, base, degraded, and somehow because of this, purified. I have never been so disgusted with myself, but I think there is a level of being that is so low that once one surpasses it all further abnegation is powerless to humble. There is a point, in other words, when humiliation becomes a source of pride; the more one grovels the more one revels in it. (I do not mean to compare this sensation with the

point where pain becomes pleasure; it is a different thing entirely; for one thing, it has no physical equivalent; it is purely a metaphysical sensation, a perception of self; perhaps some sort of defense mechanism is activated that prevents one from considering oneself an insect, or, if that level is reached, from considering that it is a bad thing to be an insect.) That point, like many other points, is another name for the hole in the center of reality, a state of suspension where nothing exists but infinite potential.

Am I too cerebral? Before I can formulate an answer to this perhaps irrelevant question, I become aware of a disturbance in Pinky's room. She is shouting and we hear her distinctly:

"It ain't my fault. You had your time. I can't help it you can't come."

"You didn't say there was a limit. I'm just asking for another five minutes, that's all."

"I did my best. What you want for thirty bucks? I been here fifteen minutes already. I can't help it you can't come."

The door opens. The trick is sitting on the bed in his shirt, his face contorted in pain and humiliation, pleading.

"What did I pay you for? You didn't even try."

"I tried, honey, you just can't make it." She goes outside.

Slowly the man puts on his pants and shoes. When he stands up he is almost six feet tall, pot-bellied, coarse looking. He comes into the lobby affecting dignity but obviously more abashed than he can deal with.

"I want my money," he says.

"Better ask her," Paul says.

"Don't think I won't. I want the money for the room. Give me my twelve bucks."

"I can't do that. You used the room."

"You heard her. Nothing happened."

"I'm not responsible for what goes on inside the room. You were in there. What can I do?"

"You can give me my money."

"I can't do that."

The man stares at Paul for several seconds. Sly comes and stands next to the man, almost touching him, and stares out the window.

"I'll remember this." He tries to slam the door when he leaves but it is on an hydraulic hinge.

Peter Bradley

The backs of the cards are red, bright and dull at the same time so that the shade is closer to pink than orange. It's the color of those pale red candies that have a faintly medicinal flavor.

The red of the hearts and diamonds is darker, richer. I have eight red cards in my hand: the 4-5-6-8-9-10 of hearts and the queen-six of diamonds. Between the four of hearts and the queen of diamonds I insert my singleton ten of spades. To the right of the diamond six I place the 10-7-6-4 of clubs.

Debbie, sitting to my left, scrutinizes her cards. Her lips purse and unpurse systematically at unconsciously regular intervals. She bids a spade.

Cynthia is cheerful, bobbing her head back and forth like a metronome, indecisive.

Cynthia sat perfectly still, staring at the back of her hand. The chair beneath her was pink, blackened and frayed. There were two windows in the room, side by side against one wall to the right of the bed. The inside of the room was reflected against the darkness beyond them: Cynthia in the pink chair, me sitting on the

edge of the bed, my hands spread on the purple coverlet, the plain brown bureau upon which rested one lamp, some pamphlets and an ashtray containing a matchbook printed with a large red S surrounded by a laurel wreath and subscripted in blue: SHERATON Hotels & Motor Inns, and in smaller print: A Worldwide Service of ITT. To the left of the windows was a floor lamp, its pole bisected by a large disk upon which lay another ashtray, the hotel insignia stamped in white on its bottom, a half-smoked duMaurier crumpled inside of it. The scene was framed against the night through the windows by orange drapes.

I watched my reflection in the window, studying the fall of my hair, verifying it with occasional glances in the tall mirror that hung over the bureau. The only light was from the lamp by the bed, its effect bizarre in the purple and orange motif of the room.

I went to the suitcase on the luggage rack by the closet and pulled out a pint of scotch: John Walker & Sons, Ltd., Kilmarnock, Scotland; Même qualité garantie partout le monde. I found a glass in the bathroom and poured whisky into it, watching Cynthia from the doorway. She sat still in a blue skirt and orange blouse like a camouflaged insect on a leaf, her hands dead white and

bony, her nails an opaque burgundy. Petite, she wore a look of unstudied pathos, imparted not by an expression of suffering but by the blankness of her features that was even more startling. I walked over and handed her the glass.

She accepted it impassively, as if to criticize me with her indifference. I had to raise her hand toward her face to get her to drink it. She drank it all at once and handed the glass back to me. I poured more whisky into it and sat on the bed rotating it between my palms, watching the laureled S move back and forth like an indecisive gear.

"It's supposed to be nice tomorrow," I said. "We can go exploring. Cynthia?"

She looked up at me and she was alright. "The places around here have such romantic names," she said. "Coyacan, Ixtapalapa, Huixquilucan, Xochimilco, Ixtapalacu, Tehuantepec. Can we go to Tehuantepec?"

"It's much further south but I guess we can go there. We can go right down to Yucatan if you want to."

"'In Yucatan, the Maya sonneteers'--I forget the rest."

"What's that?"

"Something I read in the hospital. Wallace Stevens."

"Is that where you got the idea of Mexico?"

"What idea?"

I had forgotten that Mexico had been Dr. Marchand's suggestion, not hers. She must have talked to him about it. Now I had spoiled something, intruded into something that was supposed to be mysterious--or at least spontaneous--and I hastened to recover.

"The idea of all those exotic names," I said.

"Tehuantepec and Ixta-whatever. They do have a ring to them."

"Oh, they sound beautiful, but they're probably just grubby little towns full of dirty little men trying to sell their sisters to the gringos. Grubby and hot and a waste of time. I'll bet the names are just a come-on."

"Some of those places have some fascinating ruins. Mind you, I can't remember if they're Incan or Mayan."

"Aztec, but what's the difference. Broken-down buildings and over-developed insects. I'd rather go to the beach."

"Beaches are the same everywhere. We could have gone anywhere for a beach."

"I don't feel like looking at any oceans anyway."

She was staring at her hands again and her face had reverted to its former blankness. I felt myself getting angry at her petulance until I realized that it wasn't petulance at all. It was more like profound boredom, not just a temporary lack of interest in the situation of the moment but an unshakable ennui that penetrated to the root of her and dulled all her perceptions and sensations. It was as if she felt nothing from the outside but a dull, undifferentiated pressure on her nerves, like a steady hum she had learned to live with, but secretly--and in bad moments, desperately--wished would stop.

I went to the window and drew the drapes. We were in a little room in a foreign country that was all rooms, everywhere, and we were the same people we always were, only a little more tired, a little more enervated, and trying to have a second honeymoon. Our energies were dissipated; I realized that not even a healthy conflict could arouse them. If I had screamed at her or thrown things around the room, she would still have sat there studying the veins in her hand and blocking it out; I was part of the hum. I stood quietly and looked at her and she was part of the hum, too, and my nerves, like hers, were so many defused wires.

I turned down the bed and took off my clothes. She went into the bathroom and when she came out she undressed and got in beside me. I put my hand on her arm and stroked it with what I hoped was tenderness. Her lips twitched a little but she didn't move. She got up during the night, waking me, but I fell asleep again before she came back. When I woke in the morning she was sitting on the toilet with her hands hidden between her knees, her back stooped and her hair in her eyes, the whisky bottle empty on the floor.

Chris leads the queen of hearts and I play the ten. Debbie lays out her hand; she has the ace-seven and he selects the seven. Cynthia plays the king and swoops up the trick.

"Why do my finesses never work?" Chris says.

"You shouldn't finesse on the first trick, honey," Debbie says.

Chris sucks saliva through his teeth and scrutinizes her exposed cards.

I looked up Julie one night a couple of months after we came back from Mexico. I hadn't seen her in years and

she was surprised at my appearance, my new heaviness, the beginnings of a second chin. I didn't really want to see her; I didn't want to return to old situations or suffer new sarcasms. She wanted to go out for a drink so we went to the Maidenhead. We talked for a while and she was very sarcastic. I ran out of money and she had to start paying for the drinks. She finally asked me why I wanted to see her after all this time.

"I don't know. It was just an impulse."

"You were always the master of surprise appearances."

"I just wanted to talk to someone that I knew for a long time."

The previous time I had surprised her she had made me supper. I was drunk and after drinking a bottle of wine with my steak I blacked out. The next thing I knew it was four in the morning and I had no idea where I was. She recounted what must have been an hour-long conversation, followed by about an hour's worth of sex, but I remembered none of it. That had hurt her feelings but it scared me. I felt I had lost a night of my life. I must have been aware of it while it was happening, I must even have enjoyed it, but afterwards it was as if it had never happened. I got the idea then that all of life was just the memory of it, that the moment was

meaningless unless it could be recalled, that the basic activity of life was not doing but remembering. The present didn't count; all living was in the past tense. The payoff is in remembering. Ultimately, you don't care about what you've blacked out because you have no emotional investment in it. The experience hasn't been made a part of you, you could even say a physical part, so you have no moral investment in it either. Guilt, for example, would be a totally meaningless emotion without memory. It frightened me to think that the essence of life was so cerebral, that reality, in the long run, was reduced to an aggregate of abstractions preserved in the molecules of the brain.

After a while the money ran out and we went back to her place. She had two cats to which she was allergic but she wouldn't get rid of them. We sat and watched TV on a set that she rented because she was saving money to go to Greece. I fell asleep for a few minutes and when I woke up she was lying against my shoulder. I got up and left at that point, which surprised us both. I had been looking for sex earlier and now I refused it. It's difficult to say what happened to me over the years but the intensity of my desires had certainly diminished. It wasn't just sex; it was the general libido of daily

living. All the adventure and sparkle of novelty and discovery and pleasure was something more remembered than experienced. I tried to tell myself that that was how it should be; after all, hadn't I figured it all out that night I blacked out? But this assessment seemed too incomplete to be acceptable, too evasive of the truth, whatever that might turn out to be. The trouble was, I suppose, that I never really bothered to try to find out.

I wanted to find out what time it was. I asked the woman next to me with the black hair and the bangs and she showed me her watch. It was ten-thirty-two. Chris and Cynthia had just wandered off down the beach. Debbie sat next to me watching some kids playing in the pool. The sun had risen about sixty-five degrees, assuming that it's perpendicular at noon, which isn't always the case. There were four children in the pool between five and ten years old. One of them was oriental, the shiest of the four; two little girls were French Canadian--their mother was the woman with the bangs, who seemed to be between thirty-five and forty, just beginning to expand with age, still attractive. She had nice feet for a woman her age, no corns or callouses. Her husband,

grey-haired, paunchy and very white, wandered out of the motel now and then to say a few words to her but he never stayed long. Debbie seemed amused by the children although it was hard to tell because she was squinting in the bright sun. She squinted with her whole face, her cheeks rising toward her eyes, her mouth screwed up in mock agony. She had very long hair at the time, straight and brown, the color of a forest floor at the end of autumn; it ~~was~~ tied back in a tight bun which made her head look smaller, especially since she was wearing large round sunglasses that covered approximately three-eighths of her face. She talked for a while about how most people in Miami Beach that winter seemed to be from Quebec. "It's not really like a vacation," she said. "I've heard more French down here than I usually hear at home. They even sell Canadian cigarettes in most of the stores."

"It makes you feel right at home, doesn't it?"

"Except for the snow. It isn't much of a Christmas without snow."

"I think I can stand it." I handed her the book I had been reading, a collection of Kafka's stories that she had lent me. "I'm not in the mood for this."

"I thought you'd enjoy it."

"It's too depressing for a day like this."

"Do you really find it depressing? I thought most of the stories were very funny."

"People changing into cockroaches isn't that amusing to me."

"That's one of the funniest stories in the book."

"I suppose it might be, compared to the one on the penal colony."

"That's my favorite one."

The sky began to cloud over and the Kids vacated the pool. I tried a few dives and swam around a bit. When I came out Chris and Cynthia were back, talking together. Debbie was standing up, holding her two books; she had taken off her glasses and put on her beach jacket; it was blue and red terrycloth and it made her legs look skinny. She handed me a towel.

"You're back early," I said to Cynthia,

"It's going to rain any minute," Chris said.

"So much for my tan," I said.

"Let's go into town, Peter," Cynthia said. "I want to get into a city."

"There's not that much to do there," I said.

"We can look around. There's nothing else to do."

The rain started while we were still on the road and we got lost driving into Miami. We found the jai alai fonton near the airport but it hadn't opened yet. We drove back over the causeway and when the rain stopped we walked along Lincoln Mall. I bought a pistachio ice cream cone at one place; it was the worst ice cream I ever tasted and I had to throw it away.

They make four spades. I mark them 120 for game and 500 for rubber. We win by 500 points, 1570 to 1070.

"Well, you don't deserve that," Chris says. "I hate to win the rubber and lose on points."

"We can always play another one," Cynthia says.

"That's how it goes," I say. "One large failure spells defeat no matter how hard you try to come back."

"Don't start getting philosophical," Cynthia said.

"Yeah, don't make it worse by boring us," Chris says.

"It might be interesting," Debbie says.

"Believe me, it isn't" I say.

"Believe him, believe him," Chris says.

"Are we playing another one?" Cynthia says.

"I'm too demoralized," Chris says.

"Well, it's still early," Cynthia says. "How about some more coffee?"

"Let me help," Debbie says.

"And bring in some of those cookies," I say.

"So much for your diet," Cynthia says.

"I'll start tomorrow."

"It's always tomorrow with you."

"Now who's being philosophical?"

Chris lights a cigarette and I aimlessly shuffle the red deck.

William Herold

I'm here now, alone, with her, and her, and her, and her, and an unheroic, tentatively budding hemorrhoid. Its growth creates uneasiness. It disturbs. It tickles and one squirms and for that one is grateful.

We used to stare across tables, infected by a wordless trance, while plates clattered and feet shuffled behind us, a study in agoraphobia. This could be Le St. Amable or Ruby Foo's; at any rate, the food was good. Crabmeat pancakes with lobster sauce. Orange duck at Cafe Martin. She was there, probably invisible.

Like this one with me now at the copper-topped bar, already beginning to decay. She's seen everything and learned nothing. Her hands will be the first to go, or her eyes. We drink Manhattans. She proffers me a cherry, impaled on a swizzle stick. What is there to talk about but food? Why didn't Cathy think of that? Elaborate meals are a form of solitaria voluptas, as condemned by Paul, sixth pope of that name.

I lay all night in the consoling plasma. In the morning they slit the horse's belly and I tumbled to the sandy ground. They poked me with their lances. Their visors were down so I could not see their faces. Their armor seemed superfluous. The lance thrusts tickled and I rolled laughing down a hillside.

When he was told that the whole race was calling for him, Riel was teaching school in Montana.

Already mad, apparently.

As for Alexander, he died in a fever.

I am not a shadow.

The new furniture came: a couch, two chairs, an oriental rug (made in Belgium). Catherine wanted to have the room painted. She studied the curtains for some time and finally decided that they would have to be replaced.

Memory : history :: nominalism : realism.

Memory is what you know of history; history is what is known of you. Forgetfulness: an eternal present (or presence). I am not, I shall not be, a shadow, until I am the object of a deliberate forgetting.

A girl in a classroom. Her eyes, her hair. She appears to know less than she pretends. This is touching, her attempt to imply depth.

Montreal can be as dingy or pretty as any place else. It dreams, as people dream, of aggrandisement, power and fame. It has a black spot in the center of its golden soul.

This girl who is in love with Alexander the Great can be as dingy or pretty as anyone else. Prettiness is a function of ideation. So she must remain a dream, a cerebral fixation, like this city. (My idea of Montreal is locked in somewhere around 1860, when the Prince of Wales was here and St. Catherine Street was a pasture and Dominion Square a cemetery.)

Is it necessary to explain one's infatuations? He had big eyes, she has nice hair. Only the idea of a thing can be loved; the rest is undiscoverable.

Cerebration is biology with delusions.

One always lives as if one's life is on the line, as if everything one does is particularly important. True or false? If true, describe and re-evaluate the development of superstition from prehistoric times to the present. If false, someone must have a great sense of humor.

In my living room I, too, can clearly see that the drapes and the rug are mismatched. I am more interested in my indifference to the clash of colors. They are more themselves being disharmonious.

Catherine has often complained that I have barbarous taste. She is not impressed to hear that this is the result of apathy and not an aggression against her sensibility.

The decaying lady speaks to me. The conversation is not very interesting but she is inquisitive. She wants to know what I do for a living.

I used to like women like this, with too-red lips and a way of missing the ashtray with their cigarettes.

On St. Catherine Street I see a young couple sharing an ice cream cone which they have obviously just bought at Laura Secord's. Neither one of them wants to pluck out the black cherry around which they both studiously lick. Finally the girl takes the cherry between her teeth and invites the boy to take it from her mouth, which he does, laughing. Meanwhile she holds the cone at some distance from her body so that it won't drip on their clothes as they embrace. A passerby, a woman burdened with several large packages from Simpson's, inadvertently knocks it from the girl's hand.

The whole point about aging is that you become fixed in your consolations, sustained by details, especially permanent ones. Partialities and quirks become obsessive. But this is not how Catherine ages; rather, she dispossesses herself of details, of permanence. Her whole approach is, let's say, Alexandrian--expand until you die of it.

By two a.m. the crowd has dwindled and the manager is trying to close early. My lady of decomposition has fled into darkness, wobbled into oblivion. I notice two women sitting down the bar, one of them talking to a man, the other periodically staring at me for a few seconds and then looking away. I approach from behind.

"You remind me of Lady Macbeth," I say.

"Who cares?" she says.

So I know it's time to go home.

I have been working hard, mostly reading student essays. "Anti-French Conservatism in the Canada Act of 1791." "Seigniorial Tenure Oligarchy under the Quebec Act." "A Demographic Study of the Maritimes before 1812." "Upper Canada under Lord Simcoe." And trying to collect some notes for a new chapter, or group of chapters, on the growth of Montreal, 1814-1914. It goes slowly, for I am rarely inspired. I had forgotten how morbid solitude makes me. Is it that I miss Catherine, specifically, or that I am afraid of my own darkness? I do not want to be a shadow.

Religion. At first we intended to have children. I was reconciled to the great labor of tending a family, seduced, perhaps, by a patriarchal image of myself. There was some casual talk about christening procedures. At our wedding I was made to kneel before a statue of the Virgin. I was conscious the whole time that the soles of my shoes were exposed to the congregation. I resolved that I would never again submit to the primitive rites of the Roman

Church. Catherine was unmovable: children must be baptized. The debate dragged on. Finally, I conceded that if she were to steal off with the child some afternoon and return with it newly sanctified I would not protest. She insisted that I had to be present, say my lines, tip the priest, and serve canapes afterwards. It was not enough that I gave permission; I, too, must participate. I pointed out that the object of the event was to prevent the child from being denied access to everlasting bliss in the bosom of divinity. She retorted that it was a question of family wholeness, an internal sharing of ceremony, if not belief, and external oneness with the community. There was no possibility of compromise, for I cannot believe in magic. Do you renounce Satan? And all his works? I knew that I would giggle. The Wicked Witch of the West. The Pope as the Wizard of Oz.

The girl in the classroom. She reminds me of no one. This is part of her charm: she alludes to nothing, she promises a wholly self-contained experience. In other words, she promises the impossible. Is it not craven to aspire to anything less?

I drive down Park Avenue. Off to the left front I can see the Jacques Cartier Bridge. The mountain slopes away to my right. They are putting up a snow fence a few yards from the street, thin red slats connected by wire. This is to prevent tobogganers from falling under cars.

I would like to be able to tell a story: an arm extends through the window, he sees the pistol, he becomes conscious of a new role: victim. (The victim dives for cover under a couch, a shot rings out, something shatters. Under the couch all is dust and lint, a dead fly, a few coins, a luminous watch dial: ten to eight.

There are great limits to the body. It's elastic enough but altogether too finite. A few weeks of starvation suffice for it to chew itself away to nothing. A woman looks at me in the street. At first her expression seems slightly shocked and then becomes consoling. Perhaps she thinks I am suffering from cancer and have only a few hours to live.

I am becoming a shadow.

So far there have been no headaches. I don't know why I expect them. A man sits in a bathtub and amuses himself by poking his toes up through the still surface of the water, listening attentively to the faint splash.

It becomes ever more clear that people cannot be dealt with. They can barely be endured. This is because they are always trying to deal with you, to endure you.

A young woman with a yard-long ponytail washes my face. I am still laughing, though I am now in some pain. The lances have bruised me, although my flesh is not pierced. They have not pursued me, they have given me up for dead. Her hair tickles my face but I can't move my head to avoid it. She has my head between her hands and she is whispering something that I cannot hear because her hands are covering my ears.

My mother: she didn't die in my presence. I heard about it afterwards. Naturally, I was greatly distressed. This woman had promised that I would never have nightmares.

I checked into a hotel. The clerk was somewhat surly and there was no one to carry my bag. I had a little room overlooking a court. A lighted window faced mine. I heard voices beyond it but the blind was drawn so I could see nothing.

That night there was a fire. I opened my door to see if I could escape. The walls of the corridor were black, the smoke impenetrable. I shut the door and ran to the window. It was a clear night. From the window across the court a man was lowering a woman with a bedsheet.

I open the door. Catherine is standing there in her overcoat, shivering. She says: "I hope I'm not too late."

When I open the door, I am surprised to see Catherine standing there. It is the middle of the night, the middle of November, but she is wearing no coat. She seems unaffected by the cold, which is causing me to shiver. When she speaks I can see her breath. Concentrating on this, I fail to hear what she is saying.

The door opens. I am frightened. Catherine struggles to remove her key from the lock. It is stuck in the cold. Noticing me, she says: "Can you give me a hand?" "You're late," I answer.

I have trouble opening the door because I turn the latches the wrong way several times. There are three and they must be turned in different directions. I see Catherine through the gauzy curtain and the frosted glass, stamping impatiently on the cold porch. "Hurry up!" she cries.

There is a door and nothing else. It is the sole upright thing in a vacant lot. It would be easy to walk around it but she insists on knocking. The hinges are rusted and the door cannot be swung open. "Come on, come on," she calls to me. "Come around the side," I say. "Pull harder," she shouts.

Would you marry again, if you lost your wife to death or divorce?

I would have no choice. I am a married man, a man who must be married. Otherwise I am morbid and suicidal.

Do you not love yourself enough to live alone?

It is not want of self-love that makes solitude impossible for me. It is the necessity of foreign odors, incompatible with my own irritating stench. There must be friction, something to turn one's back on.

Is this not unfair to your spouse?

I cannot tell. I cannot think. I am in the process of adumbration.

I wrench the knob with all my might. The entire door, frame and all, collapses upon me. When I crawl out from beneath it, she is gone.

How about a change of scenery?

I imagine that I will move. By that I mean initiate motion. I already feel a little restless. I can readily imagine myself flitting from place to place, unable to rest in one spot. Eventually, I suppose, I may find myself in a different city, someplace like Toronto, perhaps.

Are not all cities one city?

There is only one city, yes, but the names of the streets are constantly changing, being changed.

When the smoke cleared we were escorted down the stairs into the lobby. All of us, except for the employees, were in night clothes. A common nightmare is to be caught in the street or other public place in pyjamas. One woman was especially comic in her faded, dirty slippers, one of which had lost its pom-pom. She gesticulated wildly, shouting at the clerks and porters. Everytime she lowered her arms from one of these gestures, her nightgown slipped down and one of her breasts was exposed. She would tuck it back in and then go into another bout of arm waving.

In order to avoid embarrassment, she had to persevere in making a fool of herself. She soon ran out of insults and imprecations and was reduced to sputtering inanities.

I was born in the west end of Montreal on the 14th of August, 1924. Like all facts, this means nothing.

A man sits in a bathtub staring at his feet which, in order to extend his legs, he must place against the tiled wall above the rim of the tub. Although this is more comfortable than sitting with his knees bent, it has the disadvantage of preventing the dirt beneath his toenails from being soaked away. Thoughts of opening one's veins at such moments are not uncommon. Like everyone else, he wants to leave this life with dignity and class, and, it goes without saying, with a good line.

The place is packed. In the mood for ~~some~~ something Irish, I ask the bartender for a Jameson. He brings me a Chivas. No, no, I say, I said Jameson. He gives me an irritated look and stalks away with my glass. I am being jostled on all sides and must soon lose my place at the bar. He returns with a Glenfiddich. Wrong, I say. Jameson! What? he demands. I asked for a Jameson! He throws up his hands and growls: We have no Jameson! Yet I can clearly see the tapered bottle behind him, on the second shelf.

2

He talks to the water, which is blue with Calgon bath crystals. Musicians play in the next room: a Mahler symphony, a Beethoven quartet. He hums to himself, he hums out loud, he bursts into song. Blood flows all around him, he faints, blood does not flow, he sings cheerfully in the white and blue room.

He believes it is important, as a last act of defiance, to die in a good mood.

I live. Je vis. Je suis en vie. Vive l'Empereur!
Vive la reine! Vivent les vacances!

It is getting late. Already the house is cold. If I went for a walk the streets would be empty. Even the armored lancers have retired, and the unexpected Veronica. In any case, I cannot get the door open. It's the dead end of November, a month entirely despicable. When I walk outside, in broad daylight with my chest thrust out, my bulk as space-consuming as I can make it, I am constantly jostled and bumped, as if I were invisible. I am not invisible. It's getting cold and everyone is in a hurry to get indoors. I am a shadow, the only shadow

on the street. The dead leaves on the pavement fail to crunch when I step on them. It is thoroughly November, hatefully so. I cannot read another line, nor write one.

Catherine is at the door, she is not at the door: two possibilities. My face needs washing or I'll grow a beard:

does it matter? I blame November, what else can I do?

God I hate November God I hate it God I hate God.

Debbie Watson

Peter pours cognac into snifters to drink with our coffee, Courvoisier VS, while Cynthia and I distribute cups.

"Not like that," Chris says. "You should tip the glass on its side to get the exact measure. Try and have a little class, Peter."

"No need for that," Peter says. "That's only for amateurs. We professional pourers have our own technique."

"You're a sommelier now, are you?"

"There's only three of us left in North America," Peter says.

"Forgot the milk," Cynthia says.

"I'll get it," I say.

Cynthia on the edge of her seat, on the edge of her life. That's almost maudlin; too sentimental and not quite fair. Cynthia pasting herself together like a model airplane, her continued existence an act of will, everything deliberate, studied and conscious, compromised by too much awareness; and too much failed premeditation, too many simple plans jumbled in the execution, always the refrain--dejected or defensive or nervously laughed off--"that's not what I meant to say;" Cynthia more aware

than I am of the great disparity between the silly things you say and the serious things you think, between the mechanical operation of speech and the chemical processes of thought, with no place between the test tube and the machine for the protesting interjection of mind or soul or God or even will, although crude will is what keeps her alive on the most primitive level, shorn of the more sophisticated accretions of less blasted, perforce more superficially subtle personalities.

Cynthia and Peter, a kind of chaos and a kind of order, not complementary but cancelling each other out like matter and anti-matter. His existence is determined, not like hers by an act of will, but by an act of wit; a combination of craftiness, duplicity and concealed aggression; the best qualities, in other words, of animals too physically weak to get along by pure brutality; not that brutality is absent--rather, it has retired in the absence of a strong will to direct it and the other, more cunning qualities have been allowed to dominate, not by virtue of their superiority but simply because they were more appropriate in the given situation, when the organism was compelled to survive in proximity to another, better adapted one; one that, although less highly evolved, possessed a more primitive strength and

at least an equal measure of savagery and lust for self-perpetuation.

When I come back from the bathroom they are all laughing. Chris has just told a joke and even Cynthia-- or especially Cynthia--enjoyed it. Her laugh is unstrained and relaxed--comfortable, natural. She has had a second cognac (a warning?) and a tension-free evening and we are all at ease.

"The trouble with me is that I can never remember jokes," Peter says. "I only remembered one joke in my whole life and now I've even forgotten that one."

"Think of it," Chris says. "All that humor locked away in your head and it's inaccessible. You used to have a good memory. What happened?"

"Only for numbers."

"He can't even remember to lock the doors at night," Cynthia says.

"In that case, you ought to have a dog," Chris says.

"Preferably a large vicious one."

"I'd be too afraid of it," Cynthia said.

"Besides, they're messy," Peter says.

"You train them," Chris says.

"Them?" Cynthia says. "How many are we supposed to get?"

"Just one--with lots of teeth," Chris says.

"But wouldn't it be awful if someone did come in and we came down in the morning and found a corpse in the living room? I think I'd rather be robbed."

"It's not the corpse that bothers her," Peter says.

"It's the mess it would make."

"This is getting a little morbid," I say.

"That's your department, Peter," Cynthia says.

"It's the death that frightens me."

After the concert, we went back to her place, both still tingling from the music, excited and aroused by it so that we felt we could think more clearly, understand more deeply, and speak with greater confidence, authority and meaningfulness on any subject, but especially human matters, that is, those topics which most clearly concern the heart and soul of man, two commodities which at that time seemed worth believing in as entities from which originated everything most valuable in life.

It was an embarrassing conversation, in retrospect, morally painful to recall, like so many things. Other examples include Dr. Marchand's face, Chris drunk, myself smashing our apartment, Cynthia drunk, and Miami Beach. Miami Beach especially strains my nerves to think about; a time of tension under the surface, with nothing said but

something always about to happen, Cynthia smiling and about to explode and nobody knowing how to contain the blast or how to defuse her before the timer ran out of free seconds; the rain on the car windows, the water roiling under the causeway, the heavy dampness on the mall after the storm, Cynthia on the mall not saying what she meant. Nothing really seems different in the look of her now; the same strained movements, the taut skin on her face, the unsure eyes; always, it seems, the proximity of despair, the sometimes passion and the omnipresent, implacable will, pushing her on despite the pressure on chassis and motor, to the midnight screams and the ins and outs of the inevitable ocean.

This is memory, physical in the cells, lodged there like a parasite.

Cynthia has ceased to respond. The draining process that began earlier has not been arrested, as I had hoped it would be, by Peter changing the subject; if anything, it has accelerated to the point where she seems about to cry.

"Have some more brandy," Peter says.

"No thanks," I say. "It's about time we were off."

"It's early yet," Peter says.

"Tomorrow's a working day," I say.

"What are you worried about?" Chris says. "You don't work anymore. Still, we may as well hit the road."

We all stand up except Cynthia; now she does begin to cry, without sobbing.

"What's the matter, Cynthia?" Peter says, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She doesn't answer. He puts his arms around her and begins to rock her. I gesture with my hand to Chris and he goes to the closet. Cynthia is crying more volubly now, rocking back and forth in Peter's arms.

"All anyone ever talks about is death," she says.

"It wasn't my fault."

Chris comes over with our coats. "I'm sorry, Cynthia," he says. "I didn't mean anything by what I said."

"Nobody ever does," she says. She goes into the kitchen and closes the door.

"Maybe I should talk to her," I say.

"No, no," Peter says. "She'll be alright. She just had too much brandy, that's all."

"I'm really sorry if I said anything," Chris says.

"It's alright," Peter says. "I'll talk to her. I should have let her--well, anyway, thanks for coming. It was good seeing you and I know Cynthia appreciated it."

"Give me a call tomorrow, Peter," I say, "and let me know how she is."

"She'll be fine," he says.

"Call me anyway."

"Okay, sure."

He has slowly guided us into the vestibule. He steps in front of Chris and opens the door. Cynthia comes out of the kitchen, perfectly composed.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Too much brandy." She throws her head back with a little laugh, walks over to Peter, puts an arm around his waist and smiles up at him. She looks at me with the same smile that seems to have been carved into her face with a scalpel. I look at her eyes; not only is there no smile there, there is no fear or panic, no cry for help, no emotion of any kind; they are like the eyes of animals in photographs, blank lights in their heads. She is lit up from the inside, mechanical, animated, battery-powered, all circuits and transistors; and at the center of the electric depths--the incomprehensible soul, cold, godless and chemical.

Joanne Harrington

They repaired a pothole in the alley this morning. It seems rather silly that they should be fixing the pavement before winter but I suppose they have their reasons. Everybody always does. And when they don't they say they do, so there's really no point in questioning them or accusing them of error or aimlessness or ambivalence. Now, almost half a day later, I can still smell the tar.

This is where I live. What a surprise. I could live somewhere else and think I dreamt this up: a bedroom, a living room, a hallway, hardwood floors. The kitchen is my favorite room. It used to be green but Paul painted it yellow when he moved here. The cabinet doors are orange and there's an orange and white curtain in the window. The table and chairs used to belong to someone else. The refrigerator door doesn't shut properly, but the food never spoils. Paul has taped a Constable print to the wall, a pastoral with cows and a bridge. Paul and Alan are always going on about the poetry they write. When I show them mine they give me funny looks. None of us gets much sun.

Tom and I had a little house in N.D.G. He lives in it now, with the Persian rugs and the antique breakfront.. The stove is right in the middle of his kitchen and has a counter and stools around it. Tom liked to come home and play around in the yard, trimming hedges, pulling weeds. In the winter he shovelled the driveway himself, wearing an old Montreal Canadiens tuque and a ski jacket. We were (have been) married for a little over a year.

My mother and father were married for ten years. He was a longshoreman. The thing he hated most was shovelling snow. He had a lizard tatooed on his back. My mother had lovers whom I've never met. My father was an Irishman from Point St. Charles. My step-father was a Frenchman from Pointe-au-Trembles. James Oscar Maloney and Michel Beaubien. Michel was a cop. When he came home at night he would put his gun on his dresser and leave it there till morning. I was always afraid to touch it, thinking it would explode in my hand at first contact. He had a collection of shirt badges from all over the U.S. and Canada that he mounted, framed and hung on the walls of the basement. He had lovers and my mother divorced him when I was sixteen. My brother Nick teaches at an American base in Germany. I never hear from him. I never hear from Michel. My father was killed in a bar when someone

tossed a bomb into it. My mother went wild when I told her I was getting married. Good for her. She has long black hair and looks like a gypsy. When she sneezes, it sounds like a scream of surprise, like she's just discovered rats in her bed. I jump every time.

Paul is having his revenge on me for marrying Tom. I called him at work the other night and Alan said he was upstairs with one of the guests. When I called back an hour later he was still up there. He told me later that he had been making beds and vacuuming the hallways. I was mad at Alan for squealing like that; he could have made up a lie.

Paul enjoys his lies. They make him feel in control. Women like him; he knows how to look harmless. Should I hate him because he's an insincere lover? He's like a little boy surprised by his first hard-on.

Alexander, it turns out, inherited the invasion of Persia. I'll quote Tarn to that effect in my essay. It must have seemed a perfectly natural thing for him to do, like taking over his father's business. And of course Plato had said that it was proper for Greeks to attack barbarians any time they felt like it. I must find the exact passage for a footnote. I wonder if it

would be a good idea to cite this as an early example of master-race morality. Most people seem to have a little Raskolnikov in them.

When I loaned the Dostoevsky to Paul he complained that I had underlined most of it and it was difficult for him to read such a sloppy text. Some of the pages were falling out, he said, and he really couldn't appreciate a book that was in such poor physical condition. I read about a third of it out loud to him before we stopped seeing each other the first time. I notice he has his own copy of it now, in perfect shape, pristine, unmarked, unbroken, with only the occasional smudge from an oily finger to indicate that he ever read it.

There's an interesting parallel, now that I think of it, between Alexander and Raskolnikov: both started with a similar premise of moral elitism, lawlessness, hubris. The pawnbroker's head was Raskolnikov's Gordian knot.

The trick is to get a hold of the past, not to twist it until it makes sense. Such patterns as exist become apparent: the imagination interpolates them effortlessly, perceiving grandeur in ambiguity.

I'm not interested in memory.

You move across the room with studied steps,
but not across me.' I give you another chance
to lie but you lack imagination.

Even your body won't invent. You say
it was always a lie. You kill
the history I believed in but you can't

erase the map: the cities
are in the same places where
you sacked them.

Long, unexciting brown hair, a little red in spots
but not strikingly so; a face too wide and a nose too
flared; a complexion almost ruined by chicken pox; arms
a little too downy with down a little too dark; legs a
little too short ending in feet a little too square,
though small; ankles a little too thick, perhaps.

What's good about me, about the way I look? I guess
my eyes. My eyes are large and almond shaped and dark.
A little charcoal (Elizabeth Arden, West Germany; Lancome,
Paris; Clinique, New York) on the lids and mascara on the
lashes, a subtle plucking of the eyebrows (overdid it
once, to the point of looking like I'd shaved my forehead),
and I could aspire to a kind of beauty, in a Mediterranean
sort of way.

Paul has longer lashes and finer hair and smoother
skin but his eyes are small and an undistinguished pale
brown.

On the cover of Tarn's book there's a picture of a fourth-century tetradrachma, struck by Lysimachus of Thrace with a likeness of Alexander as a deity, showing wild curls, soft round cheeks, fat lips, a broken nose, a weak chin (!) and huge round eyes. If it weren't for those eyes (eye, really, being a profile) he'd be vaguely repulsive; but that's the eye that looked at the world and jumped the horizon.

When did you first notice I was invisible?

I cannot move you, even to
an answer: not with pleas,
or demands, or firmly planted hips.

I can stick my breasts into your back
like a pair of guns and watch you flame
to the trenches. You leave a trail of smoke

but you don't shoot back or bail out.
You fall like a star that fell
a million years ago, too distant

to be noticed till its light reached
earth, and then we realize
it was never really there in our lifetime.

We make up reasons for things; give ourselves explanations, except that the reasons are never absolute, not machine-made. New explanations are formulated every day to accomodate new perspectives; in this way we are like a language that is constantly being reinvented until,

like Latin, we die. The problem is that we never know where we are; once we start distrusting our rationalizations we fall apart like buildings that have been constructed by a dozen architects ignorant of each other's plans. Or we take the easy way out and just go quietly crazy. Or we prop ourselves up on what is left of our optimism and hire a less corrupt contractor.

So it doesn't matter how I explain to myself what happened between me and Tom. I don't know what the emotions were; that's one thing I could never set straight. I thought he had a knowledge that I could share, a value I could submit to. I learned that no outside value could bind me, that if submission is weakness, it is less weak if purposeful; to be deliberately passive is not the same as to be conquered. The trick is to know the purpose in advance and not to have it thrust upon you after the fact by an embarrassed intellect.

Now it seems I have submitted again, to Paul, but not innocently. I chose him specifically, because I knew he would have me. It's his function, which he enjoys through my largesse, to keep me from going crazy.

One of us must make a move, or what's the point? If you move first you'll capture me, but you don't notice I'm

in check. If I move first you'll dissolve like a false season: you've been playing without a king, impossible

to kill. I pretend there is some point, preparing breakfast, changing clothes. It's not your fault the rules escape you.

He possesses all the brutality of the committed coward. His manliness is mannered; he lacks Tom's virtu; his mind and emotions are essentially-effeminate. He waits to be dominated and then pretends to seize power, but the coup is successful only in his own imagination. He doesn't understand real will and fumbles every attempt to exercise it. He is my dark angel (what an ugly romanticism--even now I am victimized by sentimentality) and the more control I grant him, the more I obliterate myself. This is my suicide--or my answer to the urge: let him put me to sleep; like Raskolnikov, I cease to exist, having intuited the occult presence of justice.

If my crime was self-betrayal by submitting to Tom, Paul is the penance. But I have said my three Hail-Marys at the altar rail. My next man will be more than a Faust infatuated with innocence, more than a wandering dildo.

This is your power play
but I do the packing.
I tell you I'll be back

but you don't need a lover.
You need a target you can blast
without the responsibility of effort.

I can stand in an open field
as naked as you like, a red circle
painted on my stomach, point-blank

range. I could even pull the trigger
for you, if you had bothered
to bring a gun.

I think of those men who are intrigued by "a woman
with a past." I want a man with a past, a man who already
knows whether he is a failure or not, has absorbed the
knowledge and found a way to ignore it. I can't stand
people who constantly berate you with the scope of their
goals. I don't want to hear how Persia will fall; bring
me Darius' head or show me where he branded your haunches
and then contemptuously set you free.

You gave me the back of your head
for Thanksgiving. The back of your hand
might have been more interesting, but

we would have reached the same dot
on the map: the dragons are still
in the corners but nobody had the nerve

to rearrange the signposts. It's
always winter in this country; all roads
lead to the snow at the heart of the maze.

Alexander erased Persia's past with the power of his own culture; so I can erase a man's past, like Marlene Dietrich in The Blue Angel, with a cold mastery of love.

A clear cliché of a day, blue
and white. A last look around
but there are no memories, not yet.

Enter the assassin, sans poison,
weaponless. You think you've bought
your freedom cheaply. Even now

you could fold around me like a fist.
Even now you do nothing. I run
because you stand there like an axe.

The first time it was razorblades: so I wear the purple bracelets of a botched job. It's difficult to go deep enough because of the pain. Only with great concentration, easily broken down by an agitated mind, can the outside be shut off.

The second time it was the usual thing: the Big Sleep, etc. I was dazed for a day or so, but I woke up.

I have many times explained it to myself but the reasons are always different and I believe none of them. That may be reason enough in itself.

One day, after I was separated from Tom, I drove Paul to the cemetery. He followed me around, trying to please, trying to win my affection, trying not to look like a fool. I led him around tombstones and up to mausoleums and let him look up my skirt when I climbed a tree. Death and sex. I wanted to infect him with my morbidity and when he picked flowers for me, spoiling the effect, I had to reject them. Now he has his little revenge, avoiding me, slighting me, trying to impose his idea of sex. There's still a residue of death in it; I put it there, in his mind, and he fell in love with it.

Dear Paul: You made me your whore. I invited you to do it because I wanted you to feel cheap. Does that make sense? You were too bland before, asinine, passive. Now you know how to take a perfectly innocent fuck and make it into something frightening, threatening. You think you can make it embarrassing by suggesting things you think will shock me. If I don't want to do them, you insist. You're trying to break me with strange sex. You think that by degrading me you can degrade yourself and not suffer for it, get a taste of it without closing the door behind you. You were wrong. The doors are closing. This necroeroticism is the flame to your

moth. Pretty soon it will be too late. We'll be locked into this tomb, decay, talk dirty until we fall apart. It's an orgy in a mausoleum. I can't be degraded because I recognize the room; you're lost in a foreign country and by the time you learn the language and find your way back to the border it will be too late. They'll have made a citizen out of you and you'll forget where you came from, what you started as. You can do whatever you want to me. Your soul's on the line, not mine.

It doesn't pay to know too much, even about yourself. Socrates was wrong: self-knowledge makes you passive and complacent. You can only win by making others become like you. You know that, too, but you don't know which of us is becoming like the other.

One problem is that you are my only friend. I won't count Tom; he blew it. You're trying to blow it, and you might succeed, but our little drama isn't over yet.

I never had a female friend; this now seems peculiar and I wonder how it happened. I never felt the need for one and I don't feel it now. I'm proud to be alone, the way Baudelaire was proud.

Let's take a few moments to examine the problem of desperation. You think you can save your life by writing one poem that makes the anthologies. You think this will justify whatever you do, excuse your weaknesses, absolve your trespasses, negate your pettiness. You may be right. But we don't need poets, we need lovers. I can make all the poetry I need for myself.

I often think of leaving you but so far I always come back before I go. You should remember that the string often breaks on even the best yo-yos. They don't have to be desperate: their actions are fore-ordained.

Sometimes a yoyo will attempt to break its own string. The suicide rate of yoyos is well documented. My own suicide rate is well documented: twice in twenty-two years. I haven't wanted to die in a long time, but I have no particular inclination to save myself either. For now, it's loop-the-loop and around-the-world and walking-the-dog. Something's bound to wear out sooner or later.

A night alone is a real illumination. It's always a surprise to catch yourself in the act of surviving. You wonder how you got that far and how much farther you

can go. You wonder where all this furniture came from, all these dishes and pots and utensils, this food, these books. You wonder how you could have accumulated so many artifacts of daily life and still retained the sense to wonder about them.

You normally don't have to think about these things because you have them compartmentalized. You take your showers, you cook your meals, you sit on your chairs. You perform the rituals and they take care of you. You don't have to worry whether Jesus is present in the host; all you have to do is eat it and be saved. You only have to live sixteen hours a day. That's not too much to ask, is it?

It seems I have spent most of my life as I am now, alone in a room, listening to children in alleys, streets being repaired, men shouting at each other in foreign languages. My world could be a giant nursery under construction in eastern Europe.

I look at the furniture, such as it is, and imagine the room without it. There is only one permanent light fixture. I could sit on the floor in a shadow and calculate the distance to the ceiling, to the next room, to the window, to the next dream.

It is best to remember nothing; or a line from a poem, or a face on an ancient coin, or a song by Piaf. These things, nothing in themselves, are part of a texture, a personal collage. The reality of what happened to you or what you did is too raw to be remembered with pleasure. I remember a poster of Aznavour, a thick cigarette between his lips; he squints against the smoke; there are hundreds of lines around his eyes.

I remember a scene at Crêpe Bretonne.

"I asked for framboises and I got raspberries," a man in a tweed jacket said.

"Framboises means raspberries," said the girl he was with.

"I wanted strawberries. I hate raspberries."

"I'll have pineapple," I said to Paul.

"You'll probably get bananas," Paul said.

"The waitress is Alsatian," the girl said.

"I'll probably get a rash," the man said.

"Put some syrup on it," the girl said. "You'll never know the difference."

"I'll know," the man said.

That's the problem. You always know.

One of us is happy. It rises
from the furniture like a smell of wood
and plush and leather. It might

be me. In the end, you give
your answer. I say goodbye.
Your Yes is the bullet you promised me.

I peel an orange.

There is a measure of absorption in the task that
leads to staring at nothing, to complacency, calm and
sensitivity that feeds only itself, nervelessly. The
process of peeling shuts out the world so that nothing
is left but the faint sweet tang of the rind and the
unconnected words.

I eat the orange.

On the banks of the Indus.

III

Burnt Offerings

By the beginning of winter Herold is obsessed. The quality of this obsession is that he allows himself to be absorbed by the minutiae of his body's physical signals. The consequence is that he knows and feels no other thing.

He is very susceptible to cold. When he is outside, the entirety of the cold that surrounds him is reducible to a powerful hand that he imagines fastened to the back of his neck. This causes every nerve in his body, insofar as he is able to distinguish them, and particularly those in the area of his head, to constrict. He thinks it might also have something to do with the expansion and contraction of his veins and the tightening of his muscles. This is how he explains the headaches that he suffers every time he ventures out of doors. These headaches are not relieved by aspirin; they lodge in the back of his head just above his neck and make him conscious that he is vulnerable to the irrelevancies of nature.

When he walks, compacted snow crunches beneath his feet. The paved ground becomes rugged and contoured. When it snows, the air is textured with substance. It dissolves on his face in a succession of cold stings. Herold is baffled by the elemental and bemused by his bafflement. He prefers to stay indoors. Perhaps for this reason all of his dreams are of

interiors: long corridors, secret rooms, his own house reconstructed as a labyrinth of unfamiliar passages. The furniture is covered: these rooms have never been used. He can hardly wait to tell Catherine about them, about how their house is really much larger than they thought. Beyond the bathroom wall is another wing into which they can extend their lives.

Herold's obsession fixes itself upon an object. In this way it partakes of reality and loses its frightening aspect. The object is food. By delaying eating each day for as long as possible he ensures that thoughts of food will always be uppermost in his mind, on the tip of his mind's tongue. He drifts from meal to meal (from Coquilles St. Jacques--à son façon--to Tournedos Morateur), permitting himself to eat no more than one meal per day so that his hunger will never lose its edge. It suddenly becomes of the utmost importance that he be in a state of perpetual hunger. He reads cookbooks, learns all the proper French names for things, tries his hand at such impossibilities as Quennelles Newberg. He measures time in fallen souffles. Now all his dreams are of food, for he always goes to bed hungry, allowing no other dream the opportunity to formulate. The secret rooms are hidden kitchens and unexplored pantries. He reduces his desires to a primacy that negates all else. He recognizes it as elemental and choses it for

that reason. A honed desire cannot be baffling: it knows only its object and questions nothing. His stomach contains a chorus of voices that speak to him in the same demanding tones as those that riveted Jeanne d'Arc to the back of a horse. He takes to heart Thoreau's injunction to simplify and discovers that a constantly supplicating appetite renders all other mundane vicissitudes inconsequential.

Nor is solitude to be taken seriously; it is merely a gloss on the text of self-denial. It is all a trick, a device, an experiment in distraction, a time-killer. He neglects to vote in the November election, despite his disgust with the incumbent Liberal Party, but he does not credit the Parti Quebecois victory to his indifference. As for Catherine, her moves are obviously dictated by what he conceives as a super-determinism: all roads, paved over the ruts of his curvilinear universe, perforce lead back to him. Herold never flies without a net. He keeps despair at bay with burnt offerings.

Herold drags his hunger around like a lesson he must learn. The only thing that supercedes it in authority is the cold. He knows he can always ingest nutrients but from weather he can only retreat. It is not a proper metaphor for his concentrated passion, his will to oblivion. Above all, he wants to be in control of his own pain.

Beans Almandine

A week before Christmas, his dinner (steak Béarnaise, green beans almandine) is interrupted by the appearance of Catherine. Her face is white and drawn beneath a woolen hat, the tops of her cheekbones are red and dry from the wind. Her approach is tentative.

Hi, Bill.

Come in.

She enters the hallway and looks at him with glazed eyes. Her aging woman's face is like a little girl's, made young by low temperature, but her eyes burn. She is sick, he can see that, weak and squeezed from the inside, in the grip of a microscopic invasion.

He asks her what is wrong. Her movements are slow: she is bound, caught, dimensionless, enclosed.

She just came by to pick up a few things. She hopes she isn't disturbing him.

He means what is the matter with her.

She thinks she is getting the flu. She feels kind of nauseous.

He takes her coat and guides her to a chair in the living room. Her nose is peeling. She is very thin. When she sits it is not, as he imagined it would be, as if she has never left. On the contrary, it is as if she has never

been there. He is uncomfortable, playing host to his wife. Should he offer her a cocktail? A proper cocktail must contain bitters and he has none.

When he was young, he used to try to picture what it would be like to live with the various girls that he knew. If he were sick, would this one's presence comfort him? He was surprised that many of his hypothetical nursemaids exacerbated the feeling of illness he had summoned, and he concluded from this that he could not love them. In order to experience love it was necessary for him to feel comfortable in someone's care. Catherine was a comfort when he suffered.

She looks terrible, he tells her.

Thank you.

He didn't mean it that way. She knows what he meant. He's glad to see her.

Is he really?

She sits stiffly, her feet close together in their soft leather boots, her hands on her knees. She has a way of looking toward the window, an old habit, an excuse to be looking somewhere. The window is opaque with curtains of frost. Herold has breathed on a portion of it, rubbing away the frost in order to look out; this area has

refrozen into a semi-transparent crystalline murkiness. Catherine likes to scratch frosted windows, to feel the ice melting beneath her fingernails, but she is too far away.

Is she surprised? Didn't she think he'd miss her?

She misses him. Her lips hardly move. Her face seems frozen, insensate, dotted with tiny pinpricks of red.

She must be about ready to come home, eh?

No, not quite.

(She realizes that there is no music, that she is in a scene with no background. Herold always plays music; it defines the space he inhabits. In silence he is strange.)

Not quite?

She is sorry it is taking a long time.

Jesus.

She is a visiting ghost, obsessed with its own haunting. The soul has nowhere to touch down: there are too many possibilities. The earth opens but does not receive. Her fever is an impenetrable cocoon. She will emerge, caparisoned and dazzling, symmetrical and transitory. For now, she sits in some inaccessible astral space. He sees her through a filter, in another dimension, her existence hinted at but not quite apprehensible, a Cartesian duality. It is like watching her on television.

He waits. He will wait her out.

Doesn't he understand?

No, he does not.

He will be angry, he knows that. There is nothing he can do about it. He will be provoked by the gauziness of her presence, by the silky there-not-there caress of her transparency.

He still doesn't understand her?

What is there to understand? The hermetic inviolability of otherness, pristine in its separation from known laws, corners him. It will not surrender. It holds out while he despoils the countryside, consuming all available sustenance. There is no taking it by storm. He is cornered in the wide expanse of the outside world.

She looks embarrassed.

She is a little. He looks thin.

So does she.

She stands up, uncharacteristically neglecting to smooth her skirt. Herold watches her. She is his life, after all. He is sorry he has eaten. He plays with one of his fingers abstractly, worrying a cuticle. She will leave him and he will recreate himself. He is at a loss for method, not having progressed past naming his own fascinations.

She will just get a few things.

She is tottering. Is she alright?

She is a little dizzy.

He'll help her.

He puts an arm around her shoulders and guides her to the bedroom. She sits on the bed and shivers.

Does she want something to eat?

No thanks.

Sure?

Well, maybe some soup. If it's not too much trouble.

He has some green beans.

Alright, that sounds good.

How about a steak?

No.

Is she sure?

Just the beans will be fine.

He brings her a plateful. The sliced almonds crunch between her teeth. She seems annoyed with them, irritated by the necessity of having to chew them for so long. She has to eat slowly while Herold watches, listening to the crunching. She is smeared on a slide, the spasms of digestion visible to the great, impassive eye observing her petulant fury and, in a sense, inventing it.

She's hungry.

Not really.

She acts it.

Herold knows that hunger makes everything, even things one normally doesn't care for, taste exceptionally good. Flavor is usually a scarcely nuanced sensation, a blunt happening quickly absorbed and forgotten by olfactory organ and taste buds. Under extreme conditions, however, flavor becomes a lingering explosion of unexpected and gratifying delight, subtle and profound, cadenced, melodic and pure, scattering its debris in a radiant, mildly entropic expansion, not unlike the birth of a universe. The nuisance of the almonds, preventing the quick consumption of the beans, postpones satisfaction and should, therefore, enhance the overall experience. But Catherine is apparently insensitive to the delicacy--to the careful orchestration--of the event.

She hands him the plate. He accepts it without comment, holding it up as if to pass it around for coins, still waiting. To achieve a state of waitingness is now his object, to make himself still, and in the perfection of that quietude to have revealed to him the blurred outlines of figures in the darkness, an exposing of mystery, a falling away of shadow, a new fulsomeness arising from nullity.

She is tired. She should go.

Why doesn't she lie down and take a nap?

Really, she should go.

The only light is the light from the hallway. In semi-darkness she is less ephemeral. An animal has just eaten, has affirmed its substantiality. She is presence, she is being, unfolding in time like a real thing, confined, delineated in space, physical in the world. She stands out against the darkness like a carved naiad on an entablature.

She should lie down, get some rest.

He doesn't mind?

Why should he mind?

Alright.

She removes her dress and Herold folds it over a hanger. She lies down. Herold draws the covers over her and touches his lips to her forehead.

Is she hot?

She's feverish.

She feels so sick.

She should get some sleep. Does she want an aspirin?

No, she took some before.

She'll feel better tomorrow.

Her head on the pillow: in pain, aureoled with smell of sickness, hot, alive.

She thanks him for letting her stay.

He's glad she's here.


He's good to her.

It's the least he can do.

(Thanks anyway.

Her eyes close. He, too, is hot and cold. Closing the door, there is nothing to do. There is no such thing as death, only its semblance in victims of exhaustion. Hungry for it, it can be a tiny, sweet explosion of negation along the membranes, indeterminate and soft.

)



Fever

The fever seems to be outside her, a palpable colloid pressing against her body, insinuating itself through her pores until it fills her, crushing her between the part of it that is inside her and the part that drifts through the room like a dense cloud of malevolent particles. Trapped thus in an invisible embrace, she cannot sleep. Herold's smell effuses from the bedlinen, untempered by her own scent. Now she is unused to the one without the other. She has a fever and a flu in her stomach but her senses work. She doesn't dwell on what his smell reminds her of; she thinks of memory as a peculiar kind of disease, a pathology of the spirit. She lies awake in a chill.

She doesn't know how long she will be separate, a paper doll detached from its accordianate companions.

There will have to be a decision soon; she cannot stay with Cynthia and Peter indefinitely. Peter is always affable, in a false sort of way; Cynthia is caustic and often cruel. These are the qualities that define them, essenceless, just as Herold is now an odor on a pillowcase. Catherine has developed a new talent for simplification, just as Herold has; she can gut people like poultry and pretend they carry a void within them that she is not responsible for.

Cynthia and Peter cannot come apart; they are welded together by their desperation; they are more intense, more extreme than the Herolds.

Catherine and Cynthia have known each other since their days at Beaux Arts. Now they share pots of coffee and draw each other out.

He had a name. David. After her mother's brother. He was her favorite uncle, the one who always had candy in his pocket. Imported butterscotch, the good English kind. Paul was fifteen. She was 37. Eight years ago.

Catherine watches her consume coffee in a series of short sips, her forearm moving the cup to and from her mouth like a gear.

When he came out he was blue. She'd never seen anything like it. Did she see it then? She wonders if she made the whole thing up. She may have pictured him blue, hanging upside down from the doctor's hands like a pheasant strung up to mature. It was disgusting.

She puts down the empty cup but doesn't let it go. She holds its handle between her thumb and index finger so that it shakes slightly. (Reaching for an effect? Catherine wonders.)

When you go crazy nobody wants to believe it. They figure a few weeks in the hospital and you'll recuperate. Get over the shock, come out whole.

She wasn't crazy.

No.

It starts to snow. At first the few flakes drift slowly to the ground, melting on contact. In their falling, Catherine perceives an elegance: each flake is a minute poseur, preening for inspection, strutting to dissolution. Then it falls thicker and faster, the flakes heavy and wet, rushing to the earth. It is no longer elegant; it is massive, blunt, inevitable.

Let's face it, she flipped. No excuse for it, really. She must have been predisposed to it, primed somehow. She leaped into space, you know what she means? Eight years among the stars. Piss drunk the whole time.

The snow is piling up on the outer windowsill, matting against the window itself. Catherine watches it thicken on the glass; it is like swarms of white insects smashing against the windshield of a moving car, like something trying to get in.

She didn't have to be crazy. She didn't have to be anything. She figures by now she has a right to forget. Doesn't Catherine?

Catherine lies in the darkness, semi-delirious, while the question expands, repeats itself, transforms itself into a jingle, forms patterns in her mind, accretes a geometry, associates itself with colors, pushes her toward sleep. There was no answer and there is none.

Expectations

There are some lines in Baudelaire that Joanne is familiar with:

Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes,
L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.

She admires Baudelaire above all poets. Among other things, he is infatuated, as she is, with sensations of amplitude ("Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne") and possesses, as she does, an uncircumscribed memory ("J'aime le souvenir de ces époques nues"). Baudelaire and Joanne both recognize the transparency of boundaries: they claim all space and inhabit all time (do, will, or would like to). They are perplexed by their lack of freedom, by their manifest finitude, by the failure of the world to rebel against physical laws. There is no separation, in the quality of imagination with which they surround themselves, between dreamscape and worldview.

Joanne has developed, to an exaggerated degree, the common tendencies of projection and identification. There is no part of her, when she reads these lines, that is not Baudelaire, no distinction between their objectively dissimilar values, no element of reflection, judgment and partial rejection. As she absorbs his words she accepts them unequivocally as constituent threads in the material of her self that she weaves into the cloak of her consciousness.

(She can as easily adapt herself to Satanic litany as to the frustrations of a mechanically awry male member. If she is impressionable to a near-pathological degree, this becomes her strength, justification and confusion.

When she reads the lines, therefore, she knows herself to be a child, specifically, the child of which he speaks, eternally infantile in terms of innocence, wonder and unqualified ambition: She recognizes herself as an enamorata of maps; these definers of space make accessible the incomprehensibly large, eschewing detail for the sake of circumference. They delimit rather than display; they apportion the epic of infinite extension. And she is familiar with the consequence: the ache of appetite that can only be satiated by the consumption of absolute totality. She has a neural intuition that she is hungry for the universe; it imparts itself to her in the form of intense ideational claustrophobia--her mind, her life, her emotional web are cluttered with irrelevancies. She dreams of running under a sky as blue as delft until she is climbing up the air, the nonsensical accretions of her existence melting away as she soars beyond the confines of dimension to become a pure, indiscriminate embrace. This is only a dream, one that quite often recurs as she is about to capitulate to sleep. It is a painless, even comforting surrender; it is honorable, uncorrupted by either intelligence or mysticism. Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit!

This does not properly explain, in Joanne or anyone else, the emotion of dissatisfaction. This is something that she worries about: accountability. She is not free from the puzzle of uninterrupted inquiry: she wants to know why and she wants to know why she wants to know. Because there is no answer that she can ascertain, she falls back on simplicity: there is no such thing as an apprehensible reason. Because the behavior of others is often--usually, in fact--inexplicable, the imputing of rational motives must be an indulgence in fantasy, a quasi-religious appeasement of the intellect. It will not do to deny causality and rationale. Even so complex a series of events as the billions of micro-temporal neural firings and infinitesimal chemical reactions that animate the brain at any particular moment and transform themselves into readily perceived patterns of behavior must be explained in terms of something else. Joanne does not accept the claims of psychology, at least not in reference to herself. She reserves the right to act without reason, to merely behave in a causal vacuum. Needless to say, this is not a right she feels constrained to extend to others.

Joanne is irritable. She has been irritable for hours. In this state, she imagines that this irritability has always existed, has characterized the entirety of her life. In fact, she is not completely wrong in this assumption.

The immediate source of her exasperation is Paul; specifically, his apparent complacency. He spends the day in bed, reading books. This is annoying in the worst way. To explain it (she cannot help but explain), she tells herself that he cares about nothing.

She thinks he could use some new clothes.

Oh, yeah?

They could both use some.

She takes two pairs of pants from the back of a chair and holds them up for his inspection.

This is ridiculous. He has two pairs of pants, they're both the same color (black) and they're both worn through under the crotch.

She's right.

He is reading Anna Karenina in the Penguin paperback.

When Anna's name appears in the book, it is spelled "Karenin," without the terminal "a." This annoyed him at first. Now when it appears in the text, he sees it as he thinks it ought to be, Karenina, and pronounces it this way in his mind. Most of the other Russian names (with the exception of Levin) he perceives as physical symbols, making no effort to pronounce them at all. He recognizes them when they occur and identifies

them with the characters they are meant to represent, but they have no phonetic value. This is how he sees the pants that are now made to dance like puppets before him. He knows them for what they are, even recognizing their shabbiness, but he stores the information without bothering to come to terms with it. There is a distinct hole in the inner thigh of each of the four legs presented to his view. This registers as being a negative quality but it doesn't occur to him that an effort to do anything about it would necessarily be a good thing.

Now he is being drawn out of Tolstoy into the world. He is being called upon to communicate meaningfully with someone whom it would be disadvantageous to offend. A certain amount of thought restructuring is being demanded. The line of least resistance is to accommodate the alien exactation of his attention by formulating an explanation.

He can't really afford a new pair right now.

She is tired of being poor.

How original.

She is really bored with it.

What would she like him to do about it?

He realizes that he has been fooled. He has been tricked into saying the wrong thing, into delivering a straight line to the comic who will respond with a joke at his expense. He winces in anticipation.

Why doesn't he look for a better job?

Well, for one thing, he's not really qualified to do anything. Let's face it.

It is a dreary day, bleak and otherworldly. Flat clouds narrow the sky. The outside world resists penetration. Paul prefers to withdraw on days of this type, obedient to a mandated inwardness. Joanne fights back, thrashing at things, aiming her temper at random and pulling the trigger.

He is such a baby. He could at least try.

She cannot sit still. She paces, she cleans, she moves from room to room. She takes up space. Her mobile presence fills the apartment, sucking the air from it. Her freneticism makes Paul tingle with spleen.

He doesn't speak French, for another thing. How can he get a decent job in this goddamn province with no French?

He could always learn, you know. Isn't it about time?

He's too old to learn.

Too old. Right. Her mother speaks three languages.

Good for her.

He's just lazy. Why doesn't he admit it?

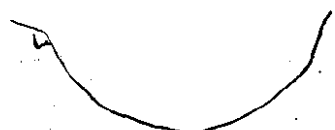
He's constitutionally indolent, alright? Anyway, she doesn't even get along with her mother. What did she bring her up for?

Let them just forget it. She's tired of this bullshit.

Paul and Joanne argue about money. This goes on for several hours. What Paul finds bewildering about this discussion, in terms of its formal elements, is that it is identical in every pertinent way to several other arguments they have had in the past. Both parties make the same points they have made before, applying the same reasoning and expressing the same frustrations. Even the technical aspects--gestures, tones of voice, inflections, and the like--are the same. The conflict is now ritual, a piece of theatre. It is the opposite of a courtship dance: it is a dance of disengagement, as if ultimate estrangement were dependent on a prolonged ceremony of mutual exorcism.

To Joanne, this is the natural order of things. What has happened to her in the past--her experience with Tom Harrington--has always seemed in violation of the way things ought to proceed. It was too sudden, too unexpected. She hates to be caught by surprise. She wants to memorize the lease before she signs it.

The argument is simple and, they both assume, common. Joanne associates (she cannot help it) money with virtue (and also virtu), or, less extravagantly, with propriety,



obligation, adulthood and--although she denies it--manliness. This is not an illogical conclusion, from her point of view. To earn money one must take an active role, exert initiative, desire independence. To be indifferent to money is to admit that one is passive and submissive, lacking in ambition and content to depend on others. No one despises money for itself, she believes; they can only despise the act of earning it. Therefore, to be contentedly impoverished, to renounce the association of money with self-assertion, is to abrogate one's freedom. And it is not manly (nor womanly either, she supposes, strictly speaking) to be resigned to not being free. And then there is the fact that, fundamentally, she wants to be spoiled a little.

Paul expresses the same value: that freedom is everything and that to willingly put oneself into a position of non-freedom is a great evil. He believes, however, that to earn money one must enter into a relationship of bondage with the source of the money. He does not wish to indenture himself to an employer on anything more than a temporary basis. To seek advancement through a lifetime of dedication is to be self-condemned, to accept slavery as a way of life, to deny a higher value. He wants to be free as much as she wants him to be free. And then there is the fact that, fundamentally, he has a disposition to laziness.

(There is a certain amount of shouting involved in this recurring debate because both parties accept the same conclusion but cannot accept each other's premises. They accept the same value but not the same definition. This leads them to hope that a resolution is possible.

Paul waits for the moment when he will be compared to Joanne's husband. He knows the comparison is inevitable, not because the husband is wealthier than the lover but because the husband's wealth is symptomatic of his manliness, as the lover's penury is symptomatic of his effeminacy. Therefore, he preemptively brings up the subject he would rather avoid. He calls Tom Harrington an asshole.

(She maintains that she has learned a great deal from this "asshole."

About what?

About everything.

Paul has interpreted the marriage, clarified its parameters to weaken it as a potential threat. He tells Joanne that her husband turned on her, that he was at first infatuated with her innocence and then grew bored with it. He deliberately offends her by saying that she was too much a virgin, too little a whore.

(Maybe that's common at his age. Some men go for the sweetness and then find they can't live without a little of the sleaze. She confused her husband by not being a perfect combination. /

He doesn't even know him. Anyway, she thought he was still her friend. She turned to him, he accepted that. Was it some kind of revenge, to hurt her back?

How is he hurting her back? He's trying to take care of her.

She's taking care of him. With Tom's money. What does she need him for?

They're supposed to love each other, remember?

Do they?

He does.

As much as he says?

What does she want him to say?

They've got to do better than that. There's got to be something else.

Like what?

She doesn't know.

His parents have been together for twenty-five years. That makes him think.

Her mother's been divorced twice. That makes her think.

She's been fucked over, that's why. She never gives anything a chance. Wait, he takes that back. Tom left her, after all. But really, did she ever think it might have been her fault?

He just said it was because of Tom's stupid expectations. How is that her fault?

What about her expectations?

He knows he has her. This is not a victory in the sense that satisfaction can be derived from it. It is merely a chance to exit.

There is no need for him to elaborate. She wanted something more heroic than she got in Tom. She took it out on him in small, subtle ways, made him think he wasn't everything he should be. Now she did it to Paul. She made Tom feel that maybe she wasn't everything she should be either, or at least not everything he wanted. The wrong combination, as Paul said.

She recognizes that this is a diversion. Who cares whose fault it was, nobody's or everybody's? The issue is money.

This is all beside the point.

The point being what?

He knows what.

Do they have to go through it all again?

Curtain.

It is the day before Christmas. In the livingroom (they can afford two rooms and a kitchen) there is a fir tree, six-feet tall, a little unsteady in its red and green stand, waiting to be decorated. The tree waits. It is still alive. They will keep the stand filled with water and a daily tablespoon of sugar. When they carry the tree out ten days later it will be dead. There will be pine needles all over the floor, embedded in the carpet. They will never get them all out. Each time they find one they will remember Christmas '76, when they were arguing over money. They will remember how the tree fell apart, branch by branch as they tried to pass it through the narrow doorway, how it shed its brittle appendages all along the hallway and down four flights of stairs to the street. Coming back upstairs, there was (will be, will be remembered) a trail of branches and needles leading straight to their door. They will remember how they kicked them aside, trying to conceal their guilt over the mess they had made.

When the tree is decorated, Joanne feels that it is over-accessorized. Paul thinks it perfect, for he did it up the way his mother used to do up the family tree when he was a child. Joanne knows that there are too many lights, that the ornaments are clustered too close together, that

the wraparound tinsel is too heavy for the tree and makes it look gaudy, and that the throw-on tinsel has been thrown on too lavishly. She says it is a whorehouse tree. Paul feels that his mother has been insulted. He closes his eyes and, leaning forward, inhales deeply of every Christmas that is the same Christmas. When Joanne was growing up, her mother would place a two-foot imitation tree on an end-table in the living room.

It's not the same as the real thing. It's the smell that counts.

They could have sprayed a little Pine-Sol around. What's the difference?

They are scheduled to have Christmas dinner with Paul's parents. Paul tells Joanne that he will ask his father for a loan. Joanne says he is old enough to take care of himself. Paul observes that that is exactly what his father will say. Paul is afraid of his father, she tells him. He is not ashamed to admit this. When he was young, his father was strict. Joanne thinks that this is why he is weak now, because he is afraid of all authority figures. Paul decides that he will not ask his father for money after all. Joanne points out that he is merely showing how weak he really is. Paul gets up on a chair to affix a plastic angel to the top

of the tree. It makes him nervous to stand on a chair and lean over. He gets dizzy. Joanne leans against the back of the chair to steady it. The angel's belly is an open ball filled with spun fiberglass. When Paul touches it, it feels like the fibers have sunk beneath the skin of his fingers.

Does she want him to ask him or not?

Figure out your own life, Paul.

Paul carefully descends from the chair. The angel isn't straight but he doesn't want to go up there again. He rubs his fingertips together. When he looks at them, tiny bits of angel hair sparkle from the grooves of his fingerprints. He wonders what it will take to get them out. Perhaps they will penetrate the skin and enter his bloodstream. He will be poisoned and die painfully. He will be pitied and soon forgotten. He is a man of sensibility, not of commerce. There is romance in this. It is defiant and satanic. O toi, le plus savant et le plus beau des Anges, / Dieu trahi par le sort et privé de louanges, / O Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!

Christmas

They have already begun to sleep side by side without touching. There was a time, a mini-epoch, when they would wake up in the night and roll over into each other's arms, into safety, into something of themselves. Their respective circumferences have receded. They have rediscovered their otherness. A touch in the night now elicits a recoil, an attempt to dispense a kiss begets a cry of unconscious disgust and an abrupt banking of the head. Each no longer lives for the other alone, if at all, if ever he or she did; it may have been an imagined limit that was never reached. This ~~is~~ evolutionary rather than sentimental; it is banal, not illuminating. When they awake they are conscious of the foulness in their mouths. They do not look at each other. They meet in the bathroom, stooped over the sink, squinting into the mirror.

Chris Watson's only living relative is his brother the doctor, who spends Christmas with his wife's family. Chris and Debbie bring their three children to the Bradley's. Cynthia, with Catherine's help, throws together a standard meal of turkey, sweet potatoes, salad and plum pudding. When Catherine remarks that her husband is practising to become a chef, Cynthia retorts that his time would be better spent

in practising to become a husband. The rest of the house (three bedrooms, three bathrooms, living room, dining room, den and basement) is dominated by the Watson siblings, who run shouting from room to room excited by the novelty of the environment, occasionally prodding an adult for some attention. Mark, the eldest at eleven, discovers a deck of playing cards in a den drawer and insists that someone demonstrate a card trick. Five-year-old Mikey, who can barely name the suits, loudly echoes his brother's exhortations, while June, eight, her braided hair pinned to her head, condemns them both as stupid and demands to be taken home.

In the evenings they played games. He taught her pinochle and backgammon and he usually won. Hating to lose, she would get upset, which he found irrational. After a while he refused to play with her anymore. He went back to reading and she took up crossword puzzles and solitaire. She never got very far with the puzzles and interrupted him constantly with questions. Her favorite solitaire was (and, inexplicably, still is) the one called Napoleon at St. Helena. It is a very difficult game to win but she does not mind losing to herself.

That deal with Tom Harrington barely came through, Chris says. He was implicated in some scandal with the Liberals after the election and shot his career all to hell. He almost blew the whole thing for me.

Peter spreads the cards face up on the table and points to one.

That's not my card, Mark says.

Yes it is, Chris says. I saw it.

Okay, how did you do it? Mark says.

Magic, Peter says.

You saw it when I picked it.

No I didn't.

Then how did you know?

They are not really, desperately poor. They merely have less money than they are used to having or than they think they ought to have. When she complains of poverty, she means there is nothing saved and no hope of saving anything. They can buy food but little else; even clothes are a problem. Even then, her complaint has less to do with present conditions than with future potential. She is afraid that she will never make it back up to the middle class. It is not the discomfort of denial that upsets her; it is the frustration of stagnation that discomfits her.

Cynthia enters the room, wearing a quilted mitten like a badge of office or medal of achievement: she can enact a role. She is proud and she suppresses her pride because suppression augments it and because others will be more proud of her if they see that (she) is not too proud of herself. This self-esteem is not the hauteur of the chef who puffs himself up because he can cook a fine meal or because he commands in the kitchen; simply, she is proud because she too can perform. She finds that it is no small accomplishment to be convincing.

We're almost ready, she says. What happened to Debbie?

She's upstairs with June, Chris says.

Aren't we going to wait for Paul and his girlfriend?

Peter says.

You can never tell when that one'll show up. We'd better start without him.

Well, let's give him a couple of minutes.

Okay, if you want to eat dry food.

The buses are running slow. He hunches up and shivers uncontrollably. She tells him to take deep breaths; if he is cold on the inside he will feel less cold on the outside. He throws back his shoulders and sucks in great draughts of bitter air. I feel like a million, he announces, spreading wide his arms. She smiles and tells him he is funny.

The Bradleys and the Watsons sit down to eat. Debbie finds the gold-papered dining room garish but says nothing. This is the first time she has noticed it. Catherine bends over the children, helping Mikey with his fork. There is a fleur-de-lys pattern on the wallpaper, white felt Bourbon lilies protruding from the walls. The immenseness of the universe is an exaggerated rumor. It is a little room, nothing visible in the night beyond its windows, covertly violent, inanimate, tactile and baroque.

They arrive late. Before they enter the house she draws him aside to confess to a sudden attack of shyness. He is cold. He has rolled his hands into fists inside his gloves. The gloves themselves are separating at the edges of the fingers. All around, the high piles of snow are covered with a crusty glaze, marbled with patches of black and, near the ground, yellow. By the street, the banks are topped with a layer of grey, resembling an arrested lava flow, that the snow-blowers have churned up from the pavement and deposited there. Around the picture window his father has stapled a string of blinking lights, so that the snow by the house flashes green and red. He tells her

to be brazen. That is what he would have her be. He is vicious in the cold; he wants to strike and run. For years he pushed heaps of heavy snow along that driveway, his hands rigid with pain. He tells her to pay no attention to anything they say to her. Do not be insulted. Between the bottom of his coat and the tops of his boots his legs are stiff and numb. She declares that she will say nothing beyond the limits courtesy demands. Up the street, a dog barks wildly as it tries to trot along the icy sidewalk and can find no purchase. They watch it struggle toward them, its master's hands invisible in his pockets where he holds the leash-end, his rubber pull-ons squeaking on the impacted snow.

She is not true to her word. Spooning buttered carrots into her plate she cannot be silent. She would not be herself if she permitted hostility to exist unanswered. She is responsible. She must assume the weight. The tension must declare itself, state its case. Galaxies explode so distantly that they cannot be heard. She will defeat the void.

She tells Cynthia how glad she is to meet her.

Cynthia nods.

Her husband is discussed. There is no way to avoid this. She is resolved to experience no embarrassment. He wants her to be brazen. Now he is warm and seems less certain.

She talks to Chris. Chris is friendly. He admires her hair, which she has brushed straight down her back. When he says he was a client of her husband's, he is stared at. The stares are so violent, so self-consciously concerned, so convinced of their rightness, that she wants to laugh. She wants to laugh so that she too can be affixed by the same sets of eyes and, laughing, deny them.

Did Chris like him?

Sure he did.

He is lying, but so obviously and with such evident shame that it is funny.

They have held each other up. They have engaged in mutual simplification in order to make things easy. They have emptied the shadows; a necessity but incomplete. But they have neglected through lack of recognition the alternative of abandonment. They have not poured themselves into each other. They are full of fear and their fear makes them selfish. And because they cannot surrender they cannot feel entirely safe.

Paul watches her carefully at first. He is nervous on her behalf. Then he slips away, is no longer a lover, no longer himself; he is someone's son. He wears a foreign name and bends to foreigners. He is theirs and she is an interloper. But he has exposed her, captured her, so part of him is hers. Still, he cannot show it here. He picks at a drumstick, separating the long flat bones, and gives her to the world.

Chris Watson is moving to New York for business reasons. Paper recycling. Joanne is fascinated, or so she says. He is touched. Her hair gleams in the dimmed light, revealing swatches of red when she tips her head at a certain angle. She has an excellent nose, straight and rounded. Her eyes are round and inquisitive. She conducts an impressive defense. No one seems to notice except Chris. He can't stop looking at her hair, at her firm, full mouth.

Joanne has never for a moment considered that it might be interesting or enjoyable to visit New York. It is dangerous and dirty. So she is surprised when she agrees to go with Chris and Debbie as their secretary/babysitter. She hates children but suddenly these three are strangely lovable. Maybe she missed something. He asks her in an offhand way, as a joke. No one is more surprised than he when she takes him seriously and accepts. He must refuse. But he does not refuse. She has taken him seriously,

Catherine is only herself. She observes the dynamics of contending enmities (her image of struggle: things contend, there is conflict between forces; people interact docilely; ergo, in combat they are depersonified) and vanishes. She anticipates Cynthia's flight, but she locks onto nothing. She is conscious of her hands, of the flesh bunching around her rings, as she slices a potato. She is without reference; she has reverted to noumena and is therefore largely ignored.

When Cynthia leaves the table, the proffered excuse is shallow and recognized as such. It is known that she is not really sick, that she wishes only to forestall her own explosion. She says she will take a pill and lie down. This is believed. Cynthia is known by a referential act: for her to lie down is for her to be Cynthia.

Peter passes the tray around the table, offering the last drumstick. There are no takers. After he has set the tray down, Catherine reaches over and takes the drumstick into her own plate. She is being watched. Now she will be known as the one who came out of nowhere to finish off the turkey.

A Digestive

We don't talk much.

I wonder why.

I don't make you uncomfortable, do I? I mean, we seem to be at ease together.

Oh, I'm sure it's just me. I'm not very good with people, I guess.

Neither am I, particularly. Strange, eh?

I never liked large gatherings. I used to keep Bill from accepting invitations. And God forbid I should ever throw a party.

No kidding.

I don't know what happened to me all of a sudden. A few months ago I got this sudden urge to start getting out and meeting new people. Surprised the both of us, I think. Now I really enjoy it.

That's good.

It's probably just the novelty of it. I think I just wanted to see what it would be like. A little home-grown self-improvement.

I'm just the opposite. I was always the first to suggest a party. Cynthia's the one who's made me morose.

You don't seem morose to me.

I don't like to wear it on my sleeve. I kid myself, you know. I figure it's more gallant to suffer silently. Truth is, I'm ashamed to be unhappy.

Ashamed? Really?

Funny, I'm not ashamed to show weakness but I hate to show grief. After the miscarriage and Cynthia's breakdown, not to mention the end of our sex life, my whole attitude changed. Not really a radical change; I mean, I didn't suddenly adopt a whole new set of values or think of myself as a completely different person, but somehow my perspective had altered. It's stupid, but I started believing in this whole romantic thing of suffering nobly without complaint, you know, bearing adversity with dignity, and having the fortitude to resist temptation. You know what I mean, the phantoms of desire and all that. Thing is, this belief in the nobility of stoicism is the biggest vice of all.

Hmmmm.

Whoops, I'm boring you. You being here, by the way, is putting all this to the test. And I admire the fact that you're not bitter.

Maybe I just don't want you to see it. Like you say, shame.

You put up the same kind of front as me. I noticed that. Shouldn't people like us protect each other?

I don't know, Peter.

Okay, I'll drop it.

That little girl spilled a coke all over the table.

Let's sit down and have a drink. Brandy alright?

I'd rather have something weaker.

Let's see what we've got here. How about Grand Marnier?

That sounds nice.

Coming up.

Thanks.

Salut.

It's good.

Excellent.

I'm sorry Cynthia was so upset.

That's what really made me mad at this Joanne. But then again, you never know with Cynthia.

I think I'll have half a glass more and then go to bed.

I'll join you. In the drink.

My God, are we flirting?

God forbid.

Chapters

He wakes up to a sensation of earthquake: rumbling and vibration. It is the day after New Years. He knows this from memory; that is, the last thing he remembers is saying to himself that tomorrow will be the day after New Years. Joanne is standing next to the bed, rumaging through a drawer full of sweaters. Her hair is loose, freshly washed and not yet completely dry. Therefore, it is flat and matted in places, wayward and frizzy in others.

Herold plays a game of cards (Piquet) with his friend Tim Andrews. Andrews is chattering about something or other. Herold suggests that they curtail all extraneous dialogue, for Piquet is a game of rigid formality which contains a unique form of ritualistic dialogue as part of its infrastructure.

Inside the city a few fires have already started. The enemy (at least those among them who are most disposed to panic) are burning themselves in their own houses. These fires are particularly noticable from the great amount of smoke that they produce, for it is still raining. This rain has already decimated the besiegers on their march; they cannot fight the disease it brings with courage or rage.

Once again a wall is breached and once again no one rushes to occupy it. Water washes over the collapsed stones; beyond, framed on either side by jagged, oblique lines of grey and brown rock, can be seen an occasional gaiety of flame, rushing clouds and, momentarily visible through the smoke, an armored torso (perhaps several) or drenched black beard.

This is not your average hangover.

Joanne can imagine.

What's all the racket? It sounds like someone's attacking the ceiling with a pneumatic drill.

They're sanding the floors up there. The new neighbors.

Jesus Christ, they're worse than the last mob. He dreamed he was at the dentist. His teeth are still throbbing. The last few days are kind of a blur. This place is insane.

Herold is past the age of screaming at the heavens, of walking home late at night with a few drinks in him, longing to pitch his voice skyward in an uninhibited howl of despair. This is something he became bored with some years ago. Herold's heaven is uninhabited; the good and bad angels long ago annihilated each other in a cosmic holocaust, leaving forever unanswerable all eschatological enquiries. Which is not to say that he has completely eliminated the tangible image of the Shriek, which sits inside him unappeased, as physical as

an extra kidney. At the end of the world, all shrieks will be set free for a moment of independent life; they will be the last things to die as the world melts in the expanding solar cloud.

The feet are planted in inertia. It would be simple to conclude the enterprise, this umpteenth undertaking which like the others promises to end nothing. It is this, perhaps, this sameness of rain, wall, breach, smoke, exhaustion, repetitive and inconclusive, that keeps the legs from running to the gap.

He goes into the kitchen, opens a bottle of Molson and returns to the bedroom. An open suitcase is lying on the floor. Joanne is filling it with underwear.

What is she up to?

She is going to New York to work for the Watsons.

She is going to New York to be a fucking babysitter?

It's a lot better than this shit.

The room continues to shake. The phone in the hallway rings.

Catherine was an unlocked door he could enter at will. She was beyond self-enclosing, a stranger to complaint. Hence the mystery. What do I love? Herold asked her. You

or your presence? He has found out that there is no way he can ever know.

They watch sullenly. The rain makes the leather of their armor heavy and uncomfortable. A soldier fidgets with a strap on one of his greaves. The leather is wet and loose and must be stretched out to dry each night lest it shrink. A single man stands in the breach, his sword arm flailing, his shield held at an angle above his head to deflect the stones and arrows that are flung at him from neighboring towers. They recognize him as Alexander by the elaborateness of his armor and the great plume (now somewhat limp and flattened, like freshly-washed hair) that projects from his helmet. Soon they are beside him (who else can lead them home?). But there is always a span of several minutes, at wall after wall, when he is alone in the breach with his dream.

The whirring from the apartment upstairs intensifies. The phone rings again, more vibrato this time. Joanne zips up the suitcase.

Now they're his neighbors. He has exclusive rights to them.

The phone rings, jangles, clangs, peals, tolls, chimes, tinkles a third time.

Why doesn't he answer the phone?

Fuck the phone.

Well, it's his phone.

He storms into the hallway in time for the fourth ring, jangle, clang, etc. The noise of the ~~sanders~~ seems to follow him out of the bedroom. He feels as if his head is inside a motor, bobbing and pounding with the pistons. There is no one on the line.

Piquet is the oldest of extant card games, invented in the fourteenth century. It is mentioned by Rabelais. The rules have changed very little in five-hundred years. It typifies history, as taught and experienced by William Herold: all change is cosmetic.

Beneath his eyes the skin is folded and dark. The lids themselves are nearly closed, until his interest is suddenly engaged and they snap open to reveal the bulging eyes on either side of the protruding bridge of his nose. Women are singing in the camp, over the syncopated hiss of the rain striking the ground and thumping on the roof of the tent.

The noise suddenly stops. He runs after her, stumbling naked down the stairs.

Paul.

What?

He's not dressed.

Oh, goddamn it, she better call him later. Call him in an hour.

He runs back into the apartment and closes the door. The whirr of the sanders begins again, penetrating and powerful, but out of reach. He retreats to the kitchen. From above comes the scraping and grinding of heavy furniture being moved. He climbs unsteadily onto a chair and pounds on the ceiling with his beer bottle. Beer spills over his face and body, running down his chest and stomach and thighs and splashing onto the floor. He pounds and pounds on the yellow ceiling until the green shows through.

In contrast to Herold, Andrews' view of history is Christian in origin. He believes in progress. Biblical angels armed with swords; Miltonic angels deploying cannon; modern angels bristling with M-16s and bazookas. The archangel Michael stands before Eden, barring re-entry from within a missile silo. His history is not, as Herold would

say, an experiment in failure; it is a book in which each succeeding generation reads a new page, so that its meaning is constantly being revealed. The last page is the page of total knowledge. No one knows how long the book is because each age must invent a new language to read further into it. Its nature is to appear like a tragedy because the resolution is hidden. It will be seen as comic in the end because, as everyone knows, history has a happy ending.

The fear the enemy exhibits is scarcely explicable, for they are superior in numbers and can hardly be at a disadvantage in morale. It can only be those eyes that transfix them; they fear a myth and in this way are religious. They have all retreated to one last fortress and await the coming of the god for whose apotheosis no one is willing to claim responsibility.

She is a stranger and perhaps monstrous. He knows she is old. She was surprised that he wanted to go home with her. They are both drunk and not convinced that reality does not rise and set with the sun. He moves between worlds. He pretends that he is making the whole thing up because he is shocked to discover that at this moment she is all he desires. He is surprised that he does not want to possess her but to be possessed by her. In her bed he tries to make

love to her with his mouth, to please her so that she will take him into herself. She begins to snore. Her body is numb. She wakes and draws him up; she doesn't want to be made love to, she wants to be fucked. Soon she is asleep again. He searches her purse for cabfare and finds only change. He takes five dollars in quarters and leaves her, heaped shapelessly on the bed, disappointed that he is incapable of disgust.

When they play cards it is important to Andrews that he win; success in life is the sum of trivial victories. Herold is less competitive; he is satisfied to perceive and interact with a pattern. It is interesting to Herold, knowing these things about the two of them, that Andrews lacks the personality to acquire authority because he cannot pay attention to detail.

One of the older veterans has fallen by the side of the road to lean against a rock in the mud. He remembers Philip. He says so to the companion who reaches down to help him up, who also was there in the beginning. His friend scrutinizes his face but perceives no sign of the disease. He lifts him under the armpits and half-carries him to the road. Neither bothers to pick up the shield,

which is falling apart, but later (that night, in fact) he regrets leaving it behind for it is possible that some of the leather might have been salvaged to repair his sandals.

He denies that he has anything in common with Don Juan, that he acts to enforce his will. On the contrary, he insists that he acts to negate his will, to subsume his self into the life of another. Yet after each encounter he scrubs himself with great care, almost with panic.

In his own bed he can think of only one thing: that Joanne has refused to own him.

Herold has, strangely, he thinks, created an image of comfort from his meagre knowledge of Joanne Harrington. He has always had trouble getting to sleep at night; his thoughts won't lie down. His version of counting sheep is to think of a woman, usually someone that he knows only slightly, a woman stopped on the street fastening the buckle of her shoe or a woman in a grocery store reading the label on a tin of soup. He imagines this woman consoling him. He imagines Joanne's hair wrapped around his chin, tickling his throat, until he dozes off.

Let's face it, Bill, you're too old for the girl.

When Champlain came to this country he was only ten years younger than I am and his wife was twelve years old.

That was the seventeenth century.

And a very civilized century it was, too.

Paul has quit the hotel. So has Alan. Alan disapproves of promiscuity and dishonesty. Paul accuses him of being a moral imperialist, sometimes a fucking moral imperialist. This conversation never goes anywhere but it comes up from time to time.

This time there is no breach, nor will they bother to try to make one. It's just too much trouble; it might take days and then they'll have to go through the whole business again of storming the gap, which in any case is easily defended. They have constructed a few scaling ladders (too few, but it's a boring job and there aren't many trees around anyway) and commence leaning them up against the wall. This is really becoming a chore, which must be obvious to the Mallians for this time there are no fires within the city.

Nancy McKenzie, who dances under the name of Fiona, has baked herself a lop-sided banana cake. She lives with her five-year-old son in a sparsely furnished railroad apartment on Av. de l'Hotel-de-Ville. She considers the men at her table. J.D. ("Dimples") teases her son. He pretends that giant frogs are preparing to invade. This is perhaps an excuse not to eat the cake which, she admits, has failed to rise. Paul picks at his piece sullenly, looking through the unwashed window at a small courtyard formed by abutments in the building. Nancy's ex-husband is a sociologist in Buffalo.

J.D. announces that he must leave. Paul, too, supposes that he ought to be moving along.

They're not going to leave her alone on her birthday, are they?

Nancy is suddenly drawn into the mythology of nativity: a special day, the beginning of the world. When the world began it was inhabited by grotesques, as foreign to emerging consciousness as a bizarre deformity. These monstrous forms become loved because they are necessary, so much so that one grows to resemble them. It is expected that the mystery they embody will eventually become known. By the time this wondering consciousness is old enough to aspire to this knowledge, the question has been forgotten. All that remains is the idea that once in history a miracle occurred.

The point of Nancy's question is that this sense of prodigy is constantly jolted by an awareness of its subjectivity.

Is Paul coming with J.D. Or not?

He guesses not.

They are as lazy as slaves, as effeminate as plants that pout without sun. He seizes a ladder for himself and finds that once again he is alone on the wall. Behind him, more ladders are brought up but the wood is sodden and none can withstand the combined weight of several men mounting at once. He knows that if he remains where he is he will be overwhelmed, so he leaps to a mound within the wall where there is a tree that he can use to protect his back. Few dare approach, for he is not strictly human. When he is no longer visible on the wall his men panic. A few make it up, climbing on each other's shoulders. When they reach him there is already a feathered shaft jutting from his chest. One of them catches an arrow in the head. The first acrid bite of smoke reaches the tree.

Paul, too, is determined by myth, taken in by the complex invention of "specialness." He is sentimental: it is her birthday. He doesn't entirely want to make love to her: there is too much work involved, it is too expensive. He is quite shocked by this because he imagines that he wants to make love to every woman. What he really wants is for every woman to want to possess him, as a thing miraculous, so that he may constantly renew his sense of mystery. J.D. has told him that the point of seduction is to exercise power, to feel powerful. Paul perceives the logic in this and therefore thinks himself perverse because for him the point is to negate power, to feel powerless. And he sees that this is a contradiction because, in fact, it is a matter of power to make oneself so desirable that the object of one's sexuality wants to destroy one and consume the remains.

He is believed to be dead. He has himself brought downriver on a barge to display himself to his men but they think it is his corpse. Not until he raises an arm in a wave do they begin to cheer. This motion, of course, causes his wound to bleed, but from the shore they see only the hand, tilting like a lily in the wind, its fingers stiff and dripping rain and blood, as much a fixture of home as painted marble.

They sit on her bed and watch Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. Little Eric is asleep.

This is her favorite show.

He always hated it.

The heat is on full blast and Paul is sweltering. He can feel no sensation in his loins. For a moment, he is afraid. Nancy is very thin, flat-chested and hipless, the opposite of his "type." Yet he loves her. That is the recognized moment, the sought-after intensity. The consequent orgasm is anti-climactic; it is the rush of love for an unlikely object that justifies the effort. She will want to be made love to and enjoy his ministrations. When he fucks her she will be a victim, lying flat and unmoving, her hands limp by her head. He will be unable to come for a long while, pounding at her violently in an effort to force ejaculation. Until she applies pressure to his perineum, he will not be able to climax. He wants their intercourse to be purely physical, unsullied by imagination or fantasy. Yet he will be forced to fantasize to keep himself erect because she is too much the stranger to know where to touch him. Finally, her hands will find the appropriate spot and he will be liberated from his own mind. Later, she will tell him that he is exceptionally virile, that for a moment she was swept away by his strength, that

for the first time in her life she felt completely in the power of a man. He will know better than to be flattered. He will know that the source of his strength, as she perceives it, is his weakness.

At some point the world collapses, implodes, so to speak, in a rush of proliferating bodies with their half-heard speech and esoteric odors, and he must flee.

This happens to Herold in a bar.

He doesn't have to stay if he doesn't want to.

No, he wants to.

It's just that she hates to be alone on her birthday.

So she's twenty-seven.

Isn't it awful?

It's fine.

She doesn't want him to feel like she's forcing him.

He likes her, okay? So stop saying that.

She has a brass bedstead. Paul examines it, fingering a dent. He knows that when he fucks her he will use the brass bars to pull himself deeper into her.

It came with the apartment, she says.

New York

Forty-second Street is wide and clear. Poniatowski shuttles back and forth along it, his hands rimming the steering wheel in a nervous caress. These things are known of him:

1. He hates New York in the winter.
2. He hates it in the summer, too, but in the winter it is twice as hard to drive.
3. He drives a taxi ten hours a day, usually from four o'clock in the afternoon until two in the morning.
4. His first name is Stanislaw, so he is usually called Stan.
5. He has a three-month-old baby who is ailing from some disease that he does not understand.
6. His eighteen-year-old son from a previous marriage lives with an older man in an obviously pederastic arrangement.
7. His wife, gone to fat and losing her hair due to a thyroid condition, drinks to excess every night.
8. He has trouble articulating his feelings.
9. On the street he dreams of Connecticut, solitude, sunsets, aquamarine and the absence of motion.

The first thing he sees as he approaches Grand Central from the east is the yellow suitcase: a knee-high battered rectangle; then the woman, girl really, her hair long and straight and half covering her face, her stance a little crooked, her chin at an arrogant tilt; then the man, gaunt in a black overcoat, his arm extended toward the street. He experiences the following thoughts, in no particular order:

1. Such hair!
2. A shabby tableau, but in no way unusual or atypical.
3. She must be blitzed by now, watching Walter Cronkite.
4. A stone path leads from the back door to the Sound.

He stops the cab and they climb into the back seat, placing the yellow suitcase between them. Poniatowski gleans the following information from the conversation that ensues:

1. They want to go to Eighty-fifth and Columbus (the girl says this, somewhat imperiously).
2. The man is grateful that she has met him.
3. She was beginning to think that she wouldn't be able to find him.
4. She has never been in Grand Central before.

(He glances into the mirror as he drives. The man is staring across the suitcase into the girl's face, smiling. The girl stares back, her hand covering his on top of the suitcase.)

5. The man thinks she looks good.
6. She thinks he looks about the same. She thinks his hair is shorter.
7. Actually, it is about the same length. Hers seems longer.
8. She was thinking of cutting it.
9. He hopes she doesn't (so does Poniatowski, who imagines it falling onto his chest as she leans above him, folding in thick piles over his nipples).
10. According to the man, who prefaces his remarks with an invocation to Jesus, they are talking like they haven't seen each other in years. In fact, it's been less than three weeks.
11. The girl wisely observes that it doesn't take long to become a stranger.

(Poniatowski maneuvers between another taxi and a Cadillac. A horn blares behind him. A house on the water, maybe a dog, not a pansy-assed thing like a poodle, a shepherd maybe, maybe not Connecticut, maybe Rhode Island or Southern Mass.)

12. The man bets that the Watsons will be surprised to see him.
13. The girl has warned them first. She is glad he has come. She has been so confused. She would like to think that they are still friends.
14. The man affirms their friendship. He wonders how she is making out.
15. She finds it boring. The kids are torture and she has to sleep in the same room as June. She guesses that she doesn't have much of a maternal instinct. And Mrs. Watson doesn't understand her at all.
16. The man hopes they don't mind him showing up like this.
17. According to the girl, he is practically a nephew. Besides, after tonight she thinks they should find a hotel (good luck, sister!). She wants to know how long he'll stay.
18. He expects to stay about a week.
19. That's longer than she expected.
20. He finally asked his father for some money.
21. That doesn't mean he has to spend it all at once.
22. Well, he can afford a couple of days.

23. She doesn't mind contributing if he wants to spend the whole week (mind, you dumb bitch!). They have a lot to talk about.

They stop talking as the taxi turns the corner at 66th and heads across the park. Poniatowski speculates on the consequences of dropping them off at 85th, driving back across town and over to the Bronx, and continuing to the sea.

The man has covered the girl's hand that is on his hand with his other hand. He kisses her across the suitcase. At this moment Poniatowski is subjected to the following images:

1. The expression on his wife's face if he never comes home (shock, misery, rage, perplexity, tears skiing down her bloated cheeks).
2. The enigmatic smile on his own face, reflected back to him in the rear-view mirror.
3. His wife standing, suitcase in hand, at the door to his sea-side cottage, a stunned look in her bleary eyes as King or Duke or Rin Tin Tin leaps for her throat.
4. The girl's hair wrapped around his thighs in the back seat, where nothing ever happens that has not happened before.

Hello/Goodbye

Joanne in New York is not released; she is captured. Alone, she is not free; she is trapped inside herself. Her head is a room, her room is a street, her street is a building, etc. She does not find the alien landscape inviting of exploration; and everywhere she is devoured by masses of her fellow creatures, whose fellowship she denies and whose creatureness she despises. When it snows, it snows wetly, and the slush creeps up her legs and seeps through her boots. She descends to a vicious plain from which hideous armies sprout, a field of Argives. The Watsons oppress her; they seem impatient. She admits that she performs her duties perfunctorily. They give her less and less to do; she begins to feel parasitical. As the twenty-second, her birthday, approaches she begins to feel distinctly unwanted. And so, with a great show of regret on both sides, she leaves for home on the first day of spring.

It is time to send them home. He will keep them from their vineyards and their cliffs no longer. He makes them rich and gives them wives. When they hear the news they are enraged: a god who no longer requires worship is not to be trusted.

Paul is late by half an hour. She is at Crepe Bretonne on Mountain Street, in full retreat. She is halfway through a carafe of red wine and half way through the Penguin Classics edition of The Bacchae (second time around) when he finally shows up.

She thanks him for being on time.

He is sorry. He wishes her a happy birthday.

She thanks him again.

He sits down. When he sits the back of his coat folds under him and he has to stand again to take it off. He makes a great show of it, intentionally, she decides, attracting attention. His hair is thick and clean and he shakes back his head to emphasize it. The effect of this public preening is somewhat undercut by the shabbiness of his clothes: his corduroy jacket is threadbare at the elbows and the cuffs of his pants are frayed and salt-eaten. Still, he is on display, oblivious to sartorial inadequacies, conscious only of organic attributes: face, hair, form. His concentration on these elements is a form of distance, a deliberate creation of coldness, an artifice of personality; without it, he believes himself unworthy.

What's that?

Euripides.

Is it good?

Yes.

What is she having?

At the moment, wine.

How about some onion soup?

They complain about the sun and then they die from it. First rain, now sun. It seems they are always killed by weather. Even Alexander, who has ordered the officers dismounted, proceeds on foot. Because he shares their pain they honor him. It is too easy to be a god, they want a brother. When there is only enough water for him alone, he pours it into the sand. This sort of thing gets a lot of applause and he is, after all, in it for the glory.

At a certain hour Catherine counts her moods. From her window she can see the street grow darker and then brighten again as the lights go on in neighboring houses. The gradations of her moods are subject to deviations of light and weather. It is a mild day, the street is wet with melting snow, the remaining snow banks are speckled and porous. As she wraps her skirt around her hips, a fingernail catches in the material and tears. Her whispered response is immediate and unconscious: maudit tare 'ieu.

It is hard to tell if Joanne is really there. Her coloration is good, an earthy blend of browns and off-whites that conjoin with the wooden half-panels and beige stucco of the walls. She won't give him a straight look; her eyes dart around the room; she is apparitional, semi-present. He notices that her clothes don't seem to fit right, as if her body is bulging in new places and subsiding in others. It is difficult to account, under the circumstances, for his desire; ordinarily, he does not respond well to aloofness. He wants to pull on her ear, smile into her face and find himself welcome.

He orders two bowls of onion soup, another carafe of wine and a strawberry crêpe. Joanne asks for a crêpe with praline.

Praline this time.

She is staring at something behind him. He doesn't bother to turn around. He knows she is lost.

They stood naked and examined each other without touching. They were conscious primarily of the tensions of shyness. To stand still was to struggle. In the half-light of late afternoon they were revealed as specimens, subject to experiment and test. It was possible to fail,

to be found wanting, to evoke hilarity. Finally, they folded into each other, like two pieces of blank paper creased and pleated into a surprising shape: an origami frog, or bird, or house with operable doors.

The perimeter of her immediate environment is topped with plastic bushes. The faded upholstery of the banquette is floral and rococo. Beyond the plastic hedgerow is the lobby of the Mount Royal Hotel which surrounds on all four sides the Rendez-Vous bar in which she sits.

She has come to a decision.

Peter will be happy to hear it.

She thinks it's over, her sabbatical. (This line has been rehearsed.)

Does she know, she was the first person he ever came here with. At least here they have syrup.

He didn't like New York, did he?

Oh, he liked it. It was the food he couldn't get used to. And the soft water. The unfamiliarity. But is she back for good?

Back in Montreal for good. She didn't get along too well with the Watsons toward the end. They're pretty straight.

She used to be.

That's funny coming from him.

Does she mean she's going home to Bill?

She thinks she's been crazy the last few months. She never really knew what she was doing. Does he understand? It was like there was another person living her life while she watched from a corner of the room.

The sun is in the room, he notices that. And a lot of chatter. A fairly cheerful place, on the whole. That will make it memorable, he supposes.

Peter knows what he is supposed to say; he knows because he has been waiting for the moment when he would have to say it. It is as if he has already said it. But to go through the motions one more time is too much of a chore. When he wakes up he wants to be still asleep.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub and tried to extract a splinter from his foot with a pin. The bathroom was dark green and ill-lit so that he had to squint and could barely make out the sliver of wood beneath his skin. He had held the pinpoint in a matchflame to sterilize it and now it was black and hot. Carefully, he scraped the skin from around

the splinter. In the end, he had to gouge out the whole area and he bled. Joanne had taken the tweezers. After a clean tweezer pull the offending object is plainly visible; there is no doubt about the success of the operation. After the messy pin technique he limped about the apartment for several hours, wondering if the thing was still in him disrupting his cells, breeding infection. Dots of blood mapped out the floor where he crossed it.

Does she think those people over there, the ones laughing, that blonde and the guy with the mustache, are laughing at them? Can they hear them?

They're too far.

Joanne eats slowly, as if without appetite, although she is hungry. The pattern of chew-swallow-drink is of a tempo that she never alters. To change the rate of ingestion to meet internal circumstances would be to admit a flexibility of values that would render those values inconsequential. In order to believe in her own fixity of being, her own continuity as an organism of preternatural merit, she must preserve as much as possible the habitual patterns that characterize her. In this way only can she be free, for to allow change would be an act of self-estrangement.

She has something to say. She wants to say it in such a way that its definitiveness is clear but not destructive. After she has said it she will feel weightless. She has measured the expense of saying it against the expense of not saying it. She is willing to pay to act and no longer willing to pay to be acted upon. It is not a very grave thing and she wants to avoid solemnity. It is not a very important thing, even in terms of a single life. The only difference it will make is that after saying it she will know that she is capable of calculation.

It doesn't matter one way or the other because it is evident that neither of them is really there, or really cares if they are anywhere.

She didn't come back because of him. (So much for the Rubicon.) She hopes he realizes that.

He didn't really think so.

She had a lot of time to think while she was away.

Always a good idea.

They can still see each other occasionally.

They can watch each other feed.

He doesn't want to take her seriously, does he?

He is sorry.

She is twenty-three years old.

Why doesn't she look at him when she talks?

Here comes the waitress.

There is a sense of engulfment, of being overwhelmed and subsumed by something. It doesn't matter what he does; that's beside the point. How could she fail to see that? Her makeup seems very cakey in this light. The holes in her face can't contain it. Yet she is pretty: one senses a prettiness beneath the make-up and the pock marks. He feels a swelling in his stomach, the inward expansion that accompanies the last moments of anything. His body threatens to quake. Then he too is free. He eats more slowly now, swallowing with great deliberation, prolonging the scratching hurt of this goodbye until its intensity wears off. She can no longer be made to do anything, to feel anything compelling in his direction. He wonders at his own lack of power.

What will she do?

Finish school, she supposes.

He thinks he'll have a drink.

She has to go.

So suddenly?

She thanks him for meeting her. She really appreciates it.

So bye.

Everywhere he looks there is movement: the waitresses shuffling in their cutesy outfits, the heads of diners bobbing, their mouths mobile in conversation or mastication, their hands mechanical and synchronized. She has left money for her share of the meal. The sticky filling of her crêpe congeals on the plate. He is conscious of the ugliness of faces, the monstrosity of noses and ears and of central orifices gaping for nourishment.

She is taller than he is, this Barsine. On the wedding night the bedstead is gold. The feast lasts five days. Roxanne, who speaks no Greek, says nothing. She moves among the silver-footed couches, buoyant on the red and purple rugs.

The moment Peter is alone (this moment precisely), he is aware of forgetfulness. He hears suitcases being thrown onto a luggage rack on the other side of the half-wall against which Catherine is sitting. He will remember the thudding of the suitcases and associate the sound with

frozen daquiries. He will forget (has already forgotten) the movement of his center of consciousness from one blank locale to another. He will remember the blanks but not the movement. It will be he filling the blanks and not his memory. Now they are constituted through the present and have been drained of their blankness.

2

IV

Death is nothing, but to live defeated is to
die every day.

--Napoleon

Tarot Overture

He (King of Coins) covers her, analogous to her destiny; that is, a thing that covers her, fatally. What she owns (not him, by God) is distributed among venues, irrecoverable. She lifts the blind, mood permitting, unsure what view to expect, which street will be revealed. There he is, on her balcony, reading a book of hers, The Bacchae, perhaps, or Zorba the Greek, sitting in a folding chair airing his beard, his head protected by a crumbled fishing hat from the blaze he dare not look in the face; the hat: sans hooks: he does not fish, does he, does not dress in rubber waders to hold at bay the icy swirl of what he never could step into twice. He has more sense than to put to the test Heraclitean verities of mad rivers, bathetic fallacy of schizoid amorphism, or of fire, for that matter. When you want him on your balcony he's there and nowhere else. He's not devious enough to fake it, suspended over Dorchester, gazing up antique Green~~2~~ Street and up at the incongruously Bauhaus Westmount Square, the black Dantesque tower of excessive, insufficient or perverted love. Doing what? Thinking, of course. What else would he be doing? Wondering what he's up to, not really very interested, except in a quasi-scientific sort of way,

himself as a smear on a slide. You have to look real close to see the life forms in there: they have a universe of their own. But he comes out of hiding, now and then, with a clumsy stroke of a stiff hand (the hand is too small for the body, and smooth, except for a large callous southwest of the right middle fingernail). It doesn't come easy and when it does it turns out not to have been worth waiting for, as well she knows.

She's crossed by someone else (Knave of Cups), who seems to know what he's doing, at least when it comes to manipulating her senses. Faking it. He has a way of going flaccid at the moment of truth, the sticking point; that is, the sticking around point. But she, too, has a flashy way with exits..

The most she can hope for (Eight of Wands) is to start again, bury these shiftless vampires and go for broke. But she won't. She'll choose between them, suspecting that flaccidity is a sine qua non characteristic of the species, unalterable. Now (she knows it) she has the chance to take a chance, but why take chances? She wants two of everything, they wear out so quickly. Their welcome, too, but never mind.

It's all based (but of course) on the old Actonian dynamic (Ace of Swords, reversed). She doesn't see herself

as victim (why should she) but as contestant among hegemons. In her power to choose, or to do without, she is free. Too free for words. So there will be no truckling. But she will not enter the dark wood unescorted.

After all, is not the struggle (3 of Swords, reversed) behind her? Hasn't she risen from the dead, so to speak, dismissed the ghosts? Hasn't she? Hasn't she slept it off, the racking intoxication with its attendant nausea (this Sartrean thing), the burst into being with capital B's, the necessary now-you-know? Well, hasn't she?

So what's ahead? Must be success (Six of Cups, reversed), of sorts, nicely fringed with the big P of pleasure. Got to be. But really, just sitting around thinking about it (now he's found something classical, on my radio, Rossini, sounds like, that Lone Ranger stuff), it won't fall that way. She knows it. For sure.

Sitting around thinking about it: that's the story.

Unable to get used to the idea. Too late to change, isn't it? Let's ride this one a while longer, one or the other of them. She thinks it has to be the other; this one's going for the gangrene, rushing it, the perverse bastard, and must be amputated. Nature provides such superfluities, just in case.

So she will be satisfied (Four of Cups, reversed).
Had too much already, wore herself out. The hell with
that, eh. It's too pat. Look at him (she looks at him),
perfectly composed, a study in composure. She'd like to
saw off the balcony, watch him (Knight of Wands, reversed)
flail through light too bright (a mere two storeys) to
some passing car's hood, whisked away like a Sabine woman
to the east end. They argued, it seems. Oh my. Over
what? Fights she picked, discontents deliberately win-
tered. Life isn't plotless, she observes, not really.
When conflict is absent, the thing drags; so strife
there shall be, if she has to invent it herself. And she
does. But now she believes it, her own fiction, and
nothing matters because she has another lover in the
wings, smoothing his tights, waiting for his cue. When
she's ready, goddamn it, and not a moment sooner.

This guy outside (Hanged Man, reversed) can't recap-
ture it. He needs to get free. Doing him a favor, really.
But he's not the only one. She has to take a couple of
steps back and check things out, restore the balance,
as it were. He's the monkey on his own back. He figures,
to his grief, that he's taken enough chances already.
Little does he know. He has new laws to learn. He has
no guts anyway, no instinct for sacrifice. Still, he must

believe in something: he's still hanging in there. But what does he want?

The future (the Fool). Invulnerable, immune, even (dare she think it?) immortal. She thinks of white roses and packing her bags (wait a minute, I live here). But she'll step off the cliff, almost by accident, a dog gnawing at her calves, oblivious to oblivion. It will be sweet (won't it?), never knowing what hit or what she hit. She'll step off (won't be the first time) more out of carelessness than anything else, or pursuit. Follow that butterfly. What? I said follow that butterfly. Do you want this on the meter, lady?

Opus Posthumous

After Joannè's funeral Herold has nothing to do. He can have a few drinks, but that would mean either appearing in public, which he is loathe to do, or drinking alone in some hotel room (he doesn't like the sound of that). Catherine is home, on Grosvenor, that is, doing--what? Talking on the phone, perhaps, or washing the curtains, or painting the view from the kitchen window (fire escapes, rotting galleries, dilapidated wooden fences, stunted trees, weeds, shadows), or reading Ubu Roi or Antigone or Les Chants de Maldoror. It is hot in his black suit (he can't get used to the stifling Centigrade thirties); nevertheless, he runs a bit on the way to his car to avoid a swarm of bees, knowing they are attracted to black (like her). This is the way the world ends: in mid-flight, pursued, choking, inaptly dressed--caught by surprise. He and Joanne caught each other by surprise, while there was still snow on the ground; or, rather, while the last of the saline slush was corroding his shoes and dissolving on his socks.

(The stone was black granite, myriad mineral specks flashing in the sunlight like a planetarium ceiling, or like dusty clothing under a black light. The procession advanced in trickles, each small group of two or three succeeded by another, Herold pulling up the rear, alone.

During the service he watched the mourners, trying to identify them from remarks Joanne had made. He knew that the dark woman with the black-rimmed eyes was her mother (don't they wear veils anymore?). He picked out Paul Bradley and Tom Harrington but could not place the rest. He wondered if they were wondering who he was, although he had identified himself to the mother, her hand a spectacular paw of thick veins, smooth skin and long red nails. They stood around the grave in a motionless tableau, stiffly black against the insistent green landscape, shimmering in the hot brightness.

He finds his car, drives to a motel on Upper Lachine Road, checks in and shaves. It is the fifth of August. He never goes anywhere without his suitcase.

(Joanne Harrington, back from New York for Spring semester, stood up. On either side of her head a brown plastic barrette caught the light angling in from the large windows. Herold, immobile behind his desk, watched the silver sparkles embedded in the plastic glitter on and off like Christmas lights as she moved her head. He

watched her lips moving, fresh and pink and unpainted, as she discoursed on Arrian and Plutarch. He watched the light play over her teeth and penetrate the pale, crystalline jelly of her eyes. She stood in the sun like a fly in amber.

He was the one who found her, stretched out on the floor between the bedroom and the bathroom, her hair matted with vomit. He had not been expected: the four towels on the bathroom rack were obviously hers, smeared pink with makeup (he had often complained that there was never any room for his own towels); there was no food in the refrigerator except for half a brick of cheddar, the orange kind that he hated. The laundry hamper was full. The verdict: death by misadventure.

She left a note, a letter, a work, a declaration, manifesto, etc., a piece of prose. It was addressed to him. He decided not to show it to anyone, although this seemed somehow morally ambiguous. The text of the letter was neatly typed, the pages numbered, errors corrected with white-out--he half expected to find a bibliography appended. He never read it. It was too sanctified, too much a document, too independent: it existed, she did not, its text as fragile in its paper nest as she in the silky weave of spider-infested fantasy.

Now, sitting in a chair by the nightstand, he reads it. His shirt is sweatsoaked and the pungency of his own odor gives him a headache. He has turned on the TV but the volume is off.

He decided it was time to do something constructive. He took Joanne to Carmen's for soup and veal and cafe mocha. She said she liked his new beard. He told her they would get along fine if they weren't self-conscious. She said she wasn't precious; after all, she was divorced. The exquisiteness of hair. The delicate curve of nails. The timid flavor of veal. There was no reason not to, basically. (Is it love he imagines or an accumulation of elegant sensations remembered?) He took her home in a taxi. The driver seemed to know something: Herold in a fit of desire. She kissed him quickly on the mouth, not without humor, the tension of withdrawn suction a message lost in transit. Clearly there was something going on in the nature of progress, of reverse entropy. Still, ever patient in the face of mystery, he neglected to kiss her back.

Dear Bill: I am bored by men who ride horses into the center of town, plant a flag in someone's skull and announce the Liberation. I'm always there at the wrong time of day, sipping a liqueur in the cafe at the edge of the square, the wrong kind of smile illuminating my face so that it's always my skull that is chosen. I want

to carry the flag, for a change, up to someone who cannot foretell the future. The newly free must be self-consuming. No one else is worthy.

Does the new beard mean you no longer consider yourself a eunuch? You are being Persianized.

Cutting a veal chop, you measure the distance to the end of the world. You would do anything not to feel the cold slap of the Ultimate Ocean, the secret darkness of the unmapped wave.

And death is the furthest thing from your mind. You wish it could be that easy, but it's not that kind of ocean. It's the kind that opens you up like a devolving reptile, pulls off your land-learned extremities, until you forget that there was ever anything but water that existed outside dreams. I want to take you there, point out the driftwood and the bones of survivors, make you admit your aquaphobia.

He had no classes the next day but the day after that he noticed that she was absent from Ancient Cultures and Civilizations. The universe was running down again, it had snowed for some reason, Pella was on everyone's hit list. Scythian horsemen stormed across the Danube as the cosmos gave up heat. Snow bunched up against the windows. It fell in fat clots, then turned wet and dense, strumming the fibres in the glass. Thrace was overrun, Olympias

cursed Antipater, Persepolis exploded like a star. Then it was raining and the world was under ice. Bodies began to fall with porcine squeals and grunts.

She was waiting for him in the hallway, asking for time which she measured in minutes. Crashing back across the light years he took her to Dupont & Smith on Peel Street where whisky sours pursed their lips.

He remarked on her absence from his class. She told him that she had decided to withdraw from school, that she had gotten a job as a waitress somewhere on Bishop Street, that she was renting an apartment near Westmount Square. She was marginally concerned about leaving school so near to the end and he suggested that advice from him would be superfluous. (This he takes to be an exchange of responsibilities, a rewriting of codes, not an abnegation.) She said she was too far behind to pass and that she wanted him to take her seriously. He did. A harpist began to play a piece he did not recognize. The sound came from the dining room. Upon reflection, he creates no metaphors. He told her he was working on techniques of frivolity (why couldn't he cure himself of this fatuous phrase-making?) that precluded the kind of response she was seeking. She said that this was her big pitch and that he shouldn't blow it. He loved her so much it was sickening, and for no reason he could think of. He was invited to dinner the next night if, like some forgotten guest of Catullus, he brought food.

Through the glass wall of the bar he looked at the traffic jousting on the street. The ebb and flow of sex and death came upon him in the smell of wet pavement and lime as he put her into a cab. (To have taken her home in his own car would have constituted an acceptance of invasion, a surrender to Christian Dior or the abstruse odor of her neck.) The tide sucked at his ankles, car horns blared. Leaning over, he kissed her before he could forget, before priestly words of solemn permission could negate the momentary mysticism. Cars hissed behind him, he was marked, slouching home in the wet, tight darkness, yearning for the alien bosom of Roxanne. It was getting colder by the time he reached his car. Aptly, if not with much wit, it was snowing in Snowdon when he arrived.

Winter folds around me like flesh around a bullet. How true is that? I can kill a season. I know how to dig a hole in it, start a fire, sleep it away. It comes apart, inevitably; all you have to do is wait. Where's the satisfaction in that?

You are surprised to see me step out of your imagination like a chrysanthemum in the snow. What I want from you is something warm to drink. I want the light from your windows, a room in your cottage, a wall against the wind.

I see you trying to keep out the night. I bring you candles but you're afraid of open flames. You would prefer the slow invention of electricity, but by that time they'll have redrawn the maps and you'll be in another country, somewhere in the third world.

You think our bodies are a mystical beginning, lizards on an altar. To be sacrificed, to become myth. We smell. We fill each other's noses with unsavory odors: smoked fish, cheesy feet, dried spit, burned skin. Not cleanly burned by quick electricity but slowly melted over a gas jet. We absorb each other, olfactorily, but this isn't what you had in mind.

I fold around winter like a mother smothering a child. Ice crystallizes on my skin and I become invisible. You don't see me standing there like a mirror. I'm a lie that you invented, like I invented you, to invent a lie. All you have to do is wait and the animals will die. There will be others but their sins will be different. This is how I love you: like a different sin, like a new animal, like a better lie.

He arrived at Joanne's precisely at six. In precision begin responsibilities. She wanted to know if he brought anything to eat. He was going to impress her with a fancy meal but he brought steaks instead (the precision of broiling meat, as opposed to the intuitive medley of a perfect, lactic mixture of dried herbs and fat).

He told her that his wife was interested (she had indicated as much in a late night phone call) in resuming conjugal interfacing (there he goes again). Joanne dryly inquired into his reaction. He assured her that he had learned to live with his own squalor. She wanted to know if he loved her at all and, in the interest of precision, he was obliged to admit that yes, he supposed he did.

She led him into the bedroom and undressed him. (This is not something he remembers the exact moment of, there being an indeterminate amount of time compressed into each concentrated segment of his memory.) She ran her fingernails (Plum Silk) down his chest, soothing their tingling wakes with her tongue. He managed to undress her in turn. Awkwardly, they exchanged satisfactions, impressive in their impoverishment. She pointed out that they were still strangers, that he had forgotten how to make love to a stranger. He owned that her worldliness was superior to his own.

They drank coffee in bed. He said that it should always be like that, in bed. She said it usually was, in the beginning. He decided that the whole thing was beyond analysis.

She asked him to take her out dancing on Tuesday night. He told her he didn't dance. She said he should learn. He told her it was out of the question. She asked him to take her out and get her drunk instead. He said that would be fine but then she'd want to come home and pass out. She said she would like that, to pass out cold. He contracted for a drunken Tuesday in exchange for a sober Wednesday. She said that was fair and would he like to rub her back.

You come to me out of winter like a salt stain on my boots. You want to mark me, corrosively. I can remove you with one hand; there's a shoe store on every corner.

You know it. You haven't tried, yet, to fit me into yourself like a kidney transplant. You'll wait for me to accept you before you try to show me what you are. Your confidence will grow like cancer, wild and malignant, eating me away until I take a scapel and cut you out of my womb.

You try to learn my body, hoping for an undiscovered country. It disturbs you to have to slalom through all the flags. There aren't that many but it's a small country.

You lean on your elbow and watch me, as if expecting ivy to sprout from my navel and shroud me like a building. A building like a maze you can enter and lose yourself in. I will find you, lead you out by the hand, and teach you how to feed yourself.

You chew your steak slowly, as if you've never tasted meat before. I have nothing to teach you. You know how to swallow.

You drink coffee and are surprised that it is bitter. When you rub my back it's as if you were pulling roots from the earth.

You come and go, you come and go. It's not only you that likes it that way. I, too, am an orbiting comet. You won't see me for another century but the fallout is no panacea.

You don't think I make sense. I don't have to.
Love, Joanne.

Herold sits immobile on the chair by the nightstand, watching the TV glow in the dark, its colors brown and russet and tan (her colors: Plumstone, Jet Coral, Misty Toffee, Wild Cinnamon, Hardy Burgundy, Gingerpeachy and Wine with Everything), its blues and greens almost subdued into extinction. The sound is off. Periodically, he raises a glass to his mouth and drinks from it with studied determination but no conviction. He pushes the skin down over each of his knuckles in turn with the thumb of the opposite hand, enjoying the intrusion of the minute pain. The seasons have changed their guard like sentries weary of vigilance. The screen flickers at him with unrepressed intensity, its pale brown effusions splashing on his face, his eyes numb in the hypnotic strobing.

Snooker

It was Spring, and not a moment too soon. Herold, physically diminished from one meal a day, his body pushed to its nutritive limits, kissed the whip of hunger. He wandered wet streets, poked into bookstores and galleries, studied stone facades, apprehended gargoyled roofs and stilted friezes, observed the interface of sky and steeple. A sum of small starvations, his bile went sweet. He bought new clothes (two sizes smaller but a perfect fit), grew a beard in black and white ("my face the nun"), indulged in minotaurian horns of vanity and despair.

This is spring and I love nothing.

You look good, Tim Andrews said.

I'm doing the book. I might love that. Ink and paper.

Guttenburg. All those monks blinding themselves.

Greeks and Romans, is it?

Little drawings on Japanese fans, packs of cards from the fifteenth century.

Eh?

I apprehend your question. It has nuances. Subtle driftings, tidal pools, national confusions. A definitive history of Montreal.

Andrews signaled to the waiter by raising his hand to the level of his head and extending thumb and forefinger.

• Jim, bring us a couple more.

Two V.O., one no ice, the waiter said. Right?

That's it.

It's a slow process, Herold said, fitting the parts together, getting the right angle to see the whole story.

Let's go upstairs and play some snooker.

It's defining a place. There are nuances beyond your archetypal question. Continuity and fragmentation, cycles and progress. The city as sonata, if you follow me.

Come on, I'll spot you twenty. Upstairs, Jim.

The eternal present, right? A door to it. You step through, nothing behind you, what have you got?

Nothing? he ventured.

Weather.

Weather?

What can you do about weather? It has more authority than you can imagine or predict. Your whims are subject to its whims, your moods to its moods. And yet its efficacy to tyrannize is constantly denied.

Twenty's not enough, is that it?

Twenty? Your ass will be grass.

We shall see.

You've been hustled, baby.

The first history of Montreal was written by Dollier de Casson in the winter of 1672-1673. At that time the French settlement on the island had only been in existence for thirty years. The original Indian village of Hochelaga, north and west of the French riverside colony, occupied land just south of what is now Sherbrooke Street, near McGill University. The Faculty Club on McTavish Street, where Herold and Tim Andrews were having a late afternoon drink, is a five minute walk from where the first inhabitants of the island had lived.

At the time when Admiral Sir David Kirke captured Quebec in 1629 there was a family in England of undistinguished origin named Herrald. These Herralds owned some land in west Devon. In the seventeenth century the main branch of the family included two clergymen (High Church), a lawyer (Robert Henry Herrald, William Herold's direct ancestor) and several military men, all Royalists, none of whom made the voyage to the new world with Admiral Kirke. Robert Henry Herrald died of the plague in 1666, leaving a son, John Robert, eleven-years old, who was fortunate to have been sent back to the family seat at the outbreak of the epidemic.

He returned to London fourteen years later and became a dealer in textiles. Robert Henry's grandson, Charles Joseph, achieved some distinction but no great reputation as a litterateur in the early eighteenth century. His great-grandson, Henry Charles, bought a commission in the army and fought with Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham.

When Montreal fell to the British in 1760 there was surprisingly little friction between the conquerors and their new subjects; most of the British officers spoke French and did not greatly interfere in the daily life of the community. Montreal's first newspaper, La Gazette du Commerce et Litteraire, founded in 1778 by Fleury Mesplet, occasionally received articles (which were never printed) written by Henry Charles, who for many years flirted with his father's profession. William Herold had other ancestors who observed, and sometimes participated in, the development of the city: a Herold (as the name was now spelled) had the dubious distinction of being one of 106 patients of the Montreal General Hospital (then on Craig Street) to be discharged as cured during the first two years of its existence; a Herold applied for passage (it was denied) on John Molson's steamship Accommodation for its initial voyage in 1809 from Montreal to Quebec City; nine Herolds figured among the 2858 residents of English descent in the 1851

census; one of these was among the first buried in 1852 in the new Protestant cemetery on Mount Royal; there was a Herold on the staff of the Bank of Montreal when it opened in 1817; several Herolds witnessed the opening of Victoria Bridge in 1859, and Windsor Station in the same year. From 1867 the Herolds were affiliated with Christ Church Cathedral on St. Catherine Street, where they paid for a stained-glass window. The Herold family, although never very prominent in municipal affairs or in society, was solidly respectable, its reputation sullied by only two of its members: an Alfred William Herold was convicted in 1894 for an indecent assault (his excuse of drunkenness did nothing to mitigate either his sentence or his shame), and Francis Arthur, William Herold's uncle, was briefly confined after the First World War for evading conscription.

My father was a lawyer. Almost a family tradition, you might say. But he never wanted me to be one. Awareness of shiftiness, that sort of thing, I don't know.

Pink in the side.

Both my sisters married Americans and moved to the States. Chicago and New Jersey. Diaspora.

Garrulous Bill.

My mother's father worked for Molson's Brewery. Helen. Dad was John William and I'm William John. When I was

growing up I never suspected that they didn't love each other.

Tim Andrews pumped the cue ball into a cluster of reds, one of which fell with a subdued plop into a netted pocket.

I always thought of them as cold and unemotional, Herold continued. They never fought and they never displayed affection. I grew up thinking it was unnatural for people to touch each other in front of others. The outward show of love or anger. Vulgar is the word I want.

Blue, side.

Once across?

Straight in.

The blue ball cut an unreal angle to the rail, where it rested after a plodding approach.

Shit, Andrews said.

Yet I am capable of great affection. My courtship of Catherine was not without passion.

Shoot.

That one. You could say I feel shame in emotion, degeneracy in shame and titillation in degeneracy. How's that?

Played this game before?

You could say I oscillate between the poles of abasement and purity, an attraction to the one balanced by a yearning for the other, or vice versa, one or the other, whatever.

You put the chalk in your pocket. That's the only thing you've pocketed all night, ha, ha.

I would like to find a woman, if you catch my drift, whose head is stamped on one side of this coin and whose tail is stamped on the other.

A man of metaphors.

I've blown a fortune in false money.

Chez Bourgetel

So spring stuck in everyone's throat like one too many. Herold opened and closed like a gill, spouting amenities and absurdities, plucking facts like bits of oxygen from the past roiling over his inner membranes. Joanne, having cast her line, waded in the shadows, reflecting on the structural precision of the standard interpretation of the Thirty Years War.

Catherine sat in the window of Chez Bourgetel, studying convex reflections in the demi-globe of a snifter. Passers-by loomed large in the middle, their heads narrowing into grim caparisons as their images washed over the bulbous surface of the glass. Contents: Amaretto di Saronna, sickly thick in a viscous pool that obscured their feet but did nothing to restrain the forward rush of their movement as they grew, exploded in a wet sparkle of diffused color and vanished around the lean curve of crystal.

Cynthia, in semi-bouffant, her hips in gear, purposefully strode between tables to rendez-vous with Catherine's felicitating eyes.

The crowds.

It's so mild, Catherine said.

Good weather makes good neighbors.

Coffee and cognac, temptation (its denial) a thing of the past, surcease of prudence, Cynthia sensible of an askance look of concern.

She's entered a new phase of living it up.

That happens.

She can't seem to live it down so she'll do the other.

The line of least resistance. Catherine knows it.

No home to go to, Cathy?

Je suis content, moi. You learn to wait.

Tell me about it, Cynthia said. I like the shoulders on that one. Just the right amount of neck. The glass emptied with a searing gravity. She was high. Does Catherine think she needs a fucking?

Who knows? (Sweet almond-coated palate, spasm, hint of involuntary bile.)

Spending too much time in the shallow end. I've been fucked enough. Peter's late.

I thought we'd have a chance to talk.

I thought we were.

I'm tired. I can't stay.

Already.

I'm expecting a call.

You run. God, I can't talk today. I've been counting the aspirins in the bottle. Took myself by surprise. Sometimes I think I'm dreaming. I have trouble remembering if things really happened or if I dreamt them. What's your story?

I always seem to be rushing off. Sorry to leave you.

The line is thin. Now I'm background. You're free of us. We Bradley's have our intuitions.

I'll talk to you tomorrow.

A soothing glow of fading daylight penetrated the unwallled room in a throe of umber, trembling into grey. Cynthia smoked a succession of du Mauriers, stubbing them out into upright stumps, dreaming. Suddenly Peter's face, blue in the last light opened and closed before her as in a badly synchronized cartoon.

Am I late?

I don't know.

Where's Cathy?

Expecting a call.

Okay, what's the matter?

I don't feel well.

Jesus, you're drunk.

That could possibly be true.

You're pissed out of your mind.

What makes you say that?

Come on, I'll take you home.

I know where it is.

Come on.

Just get me a cab.

Peter watched the taxi pull away, Cynthia stiffly prim in the back seat, her hair piled in an absurd twist of unravelling braids, his compulsion to protect flattened to a thin wafer of memory. His line of vision stretched taut as the car proceeded down Maisonneuve, snapped as it turned up Guy. Paul came up behind him.

Looking for the Pacific?

Your mother wasn't feeling well. I sent her home.

Alone?

She'll be alright.

I was kind of looking forward to talking to her.

Come on, I'll buy you a beer.

They drank Labatt Blue from short-stemmed goblets, watching the street: lights and faces, voices, feet and eyes. They talked in laconic bursts that awkwardly poked from their mouths, feinting, feeling, running for cover, measuring quarter-hours by the proliferating bottles. Finally, Peter, his last conversational spasm spent, rose to leave. •

Do you need any money?

No.

Don't lie.

Why not?

Surprise me.

Too late now. You've deked me out.

Suit yourself. Need a lift?

I'm meeting a friend.

Okay.

Hey, I'm glad we talked.

Okay.

A smile, a wave, a burp, a nostril-flaring exhalation; a look around the room for lightly-powdered cheek and luminous curve of breast; a swift, memory-testing enumeration of mounted, softly-ridged pubes and the inevitable question that scorns reply: do I hide behind my cock? Analysis, Spock. Who the fuck knows or cares?

Enter Alan Sansavar, tonsorially cavalier, begrimed, bespectacled, ponchoed, magnet to stares, impervious of disdain.

Hel-lo.

A series of tilted nods from Paul.

How did it go? Alan said.

A single nose-clogging snort, followed by a heavily-breathed I-don't-know, you-know.

Oh, well.

Well, well, well.

I thought we might do something about putting a book together.

Ah.

About sixty-four pages, quarto, good stock. Been getting some estimates.

And?

It can be done.

To be what? Filled with simpering, whining, snivelling, bitterness, maudlinity.

Nasty today.

I'm a nasty guy.

I take it she isn't coming back.

Think so?

Well, one persists.

Like a virus.

A wheezing dizziness, the room a cloud. Paul flew along his vertigo to sunken continents, nosediving to the breathing sea. To find one's feet and push, solid, to the endless blue--a quick solution; followed by an urge for distant intercourse, no gesticulating face-to-face, a plugging in to the world-voice, a matter of numbers, an abstraction of expression, cellular, remote, comforting.

Hello?

You're home.

Just walked in. What are you up to?

Is she alright?

Everything's fine. She's sleeping.

Okay. Just thought I'd check.

Alan came up behind him, awash in a different planet of broiling surfaces, molten tectonics, inscrutable odors cooked into stiffened cloth, a web of threads and spaces.

I think I should do her another reading.

My mother?

Oh. Sorry.

I wouldn't call Joanne. Jesus, I'm flying.

You still there, Paul? across the nylon ganglia.

I'm here. Is that woman still around? Looking after things and that?

She's gone home.

Oh, alright. He hung up.

That woman? Alan said.

Friend of the famille. La sacre famille, or la famille pieux, or la famille blessé. What would you say?

I'd say la sainte-famille. Blessé means wounded.

Of course. I must be dreaming. Hèy.

A curve of mobile eyebrow.

Winter's over. Great, eh? What's life without
winter?

A second eyebrow, in mute concert.

So. Spring. Eh?

The Chariot

She was in his bed that had been their bed. He found her there, his Catherine, or not his. Hair freshly cropped, thinning and curled, she was no Goldilocks; nor was he ursine in shape or manner.

Surprise, surprise, he began.

Hi. (Shyly this, but without blush of cheek or knee.)

He'll break out the fatted calf.

She's back.

She is. And without benefit of meaningful parlor conversation. Homed right in. Zoom. Nice to see her. Legs still good.

That's all he can say?

Struck speechless. Exhausted, too, but never mind. Familiar syndrome of the unwary. Has he changed? Has she?

(Miles of flat nothing stretch to the horizon in all directions. Because the horizon is at no point obscured by object or obstacle, he has the impression of standing in the center of a circle. The sky is filled from edge to edge with smoothly meshing clouds, devoid of any sign of break or overlap, a slick grey dome. The symmetrical perfection of ground and sky, plate and lid, is flawed only by his doubt. Is the vast expanse truly empty, or is it

merely that his vision is too weak to discern other shapes that may, after all, be so far distant that they are invisible to one who has always been wretchedly myopic? He begins to walk, then run, in an effort to explore the surrounding regions. He finds nothing, but the more he searches the more he is convinced that he is not alone, that he will eventually discover--must discover--something, anything, that will simultaneously give meaning to his obsessive quest and destroy the fragile premises of his universe.

Years pass. Having had time to reflect on his condition, he has become reconciled to the unpleasant truth that if he is successful in resolving the doubt that fills his mind he will be undone. He will no longer be able to claim to be at the center. Now he can live with the paradox of his fate. At this moment, however, a new fear emerges. The result may not be in his hands at all; he may be subject to a whim of chance. If he ceases from exploration, he may be able to delude himself that there was never anything to find, that there is nothing there; but what if the clouds should suddenly part or disperse and the sun appear? Such an event would surely be as shattering as the discovery that he is not alone. This thought immobilizes him. Why continue to exhaust himself in wandering when his fate is not in his power to decide? He sits and waits for the sun to do its

work, for the silver lid of clouds to be lifted by an unseen hand. This does not happen, but the possibility keeps him awake at night, trembling with disgust and horror.)

Moonstruck Herold unfastened his watch, removed his rings, piled his change in neat alignment on the bureau. Catherine gave him soft tones, sadness, suggestion of depth, the whole aura: familiar mush and accent (L'Air du Temps by Nina Ricci) but not without mystery.

So? he said. True confessions?

A dropping of eyes, puffing of face, hardening of lips: a thousand words or so.

He sees.

And him?

Moi? (Finger into chest.)

He knows what she means.

He was not quite ready for this somehow, this unexpected twist of truth telling, of earnestness. She was obviously prepared to lay things bare, including him. He was somewhere else, fully clothed, a fudge factory or carpentry shop, where the only required honesty is the utile artifice of craftsmen. He articulated:

Here comes the exasperated sigh. The automatic pattern, the myth that dreams us, all that stuff. The tentative hello, the artful arrangement of sheet and thigh, the questions pinning down the evasive quarry, and then the

little resignation as it slips away. He hasn't changed.

She, on the other hand, is somewhat different.

How?

Ah.

This isn't necessary.

The hair, for one.

He grew a beard.

Some explanation.

(The stores are closed, for it is Sunday. Walking around downtown there is nothing to do. It is overcast and gloomy but there is nowhere to go. People on the street stare into shop windows, pondering the inaccessible. He marches up and down the sidestreets between Sherbrooke and St. Catherine, amazed at his own motion.)

Herold began emptying drawers selectively, making small stacks of socks and underwear. He put his rings and watch back on, returned his change to his pocket.

He doesn't want her, she accused.

He does.

Why is he doing that?

The obvious.

She can't take this.

Alright. It seems there's another.

What?

She can stay, he'll go.

Where?

A good reporter, asking all the right questions. He'll be in touch. Bye, Bill, send money. Don't worry, she's covered. She can keep the car this time. He knows the number, have a nice life.

(River and mountain, line and point. At noon the city is an uncut diamond, irregular facets and untamed light. From the lookout on the mountain near the chalet he can see the river, he can see the metaphor and place himself at its heart, or in its loins. If the river is a silver belt, with the bridges for loops, then downtown is either stomach and chest or belly and groin. Where he stands is either the nipple of its central breast or the central testicle of its tripartite scrotum.)

She can't believe he's talking like this.

That's the trouble with the world today, he said. No faith in their own perceptions. One learns through kicking stones, breaking heads against walls, that sort of thing.

He's scaring her.

'She's scaring him. So bye.

(Evening finds him in front of the Musée de Beaux Arts. Two Michelangelo's have been stolen... Or were they Rembrandt's? In either case the place is closed for renovation. The air is alive and moist. He walks through it as through a shower of ground glass, it's that tactile.)

Herold, under cover of darkness, slunk through the streets. His head hurt but his feet followed an intelligence of their own. He debated motives, scored points for various positions, rebutted skilfully. Irrational man, he walked through grey and black and cloying brown, followed his nose through off-color streets that betrayed no blue or gold of rococo. This was it: beyond desire to the safe familiarity of fear, confusion and despair. These were words from random darts thrown against wall-affixed pages of the Oxford English Dictionary. He thought in sentences, a logician of unrealities. Pursued by self-invented goblins projected into shadows under stoops, in doorways, in alcoved alleys and looming arcades, he rushed on. Hands of derelicts reached out to touch his sleeve, his valise; he swam among leers and clear, dead eyes; he fought the stars for purchase.

The spotlight pavement flexed him through the night, unsprung the torsion that propelled him.

(In the dark the streets constrict. Not that they are unfamiliar but they are bereft of upward expansion. Now they are corridors again. His room is west and then north. Traffic gets a little heavier. The cars appear to hunt him down, for now they have eyes and eyes are able to challenge.)

Xenophobia, he said. I ran from a stranger.

To me.

I walked around all day and when I got home she was there. Now she's the other woman. I suppose you can think of a reason.

You don't need one, Joanne said.

Yes. I do.

You're sweating. You need a bath.

(Sounds, too, have changed with time, different sounds for different light. He has been walking all day. The morning, even Sunday morning, sounded harsh, irritating, always just a degree more awake than he was. Birds contributed, although bird sounds are like elevator music. The afternoon was less demanding, more consoling, more unconscious. Unless one concentrates on them, sounds have no source; they are manufactured elsewhere and must be endured or ignored. At night

they are more directly soothing, for they invest a relatively larger area of consciousness, a neutral ground between him and solitude. For this reason they are also more frightening, more redolent of threat.)

Under water, Herold's grey-haired stomach pulsed as he rubbed a bar of soap across his body. Tiny fractures ran from the taps to the tops of the tiles from which they jutted, fixing his gaze.

(Grosvenor is quiet, as always. Here is his house, attached to the one on its left, sheer on the right where the driveway slopes into the dark. Catherine's small breasts, once a mere mouthful. In the dark she is all odor. Touch is nothing; fingers are inadequately sensitive to truly communicate to the brain another's essence or distinguishable presence. Skin is rarely more than that, softness could be anything. Smell alone is unique, defining, it is all one has to go on in the dark. Perhaps for that reason it is indescribable; there is no vocabulary extensive enough to encompass all the particulars. It can only be expressed in terms of something else, as simile, one smell compared to another. Like a rose, like an apple, like freshly cut grass, like rotten eggs, like sour milk, like a festering wound. What does a rose smell like, in itself, or an apple

or a wound? Or a person, for that matter? Catherine smells like Catherine, her cunt smells like all others, to be sure, but mostly like itself only. In this way is she known to him, as he must be to her. And it is this that is remembered, this unforgeable chemical signature that defines both the person and the territory that he or she claims.

While standing outside his house sniffing the air, he stops to browse in a bookstore. As he is flipping through a book, pausing to read a passage here and there, his attention is distracted by a woman's perfume.

On the third floor of Classic's he thumbs through Wallace Stevens' The Palm at the End of the Mind. Next to him a woman asks where the philosophy section is located. Hearing her voice, smelling her scent, he is unaware that she is addressing a clerk. Turning to answer her, he allows the book to fold over his thumb. When he sees that she is not speaking to him, he turns back to the volume in his hand. A tiny insect, the size of a carroway seed, zig-zags across the bottom edge of the cover.)

The faucet dripped very slowly: one drop every twenty seconds or so. The big toe of each foot touched the aureole behind each tap, the heels resting on the rim of the tub where it met the wall, the soles flush against the tiles.

(The way she lies: he is unprepared for her frail body. She lies among the creased sheets that he has not changed in weeks, those creases in which he longed to bury himself. Her face is raised from the pillow, she leans on an elbow, she sits up. There is nothing between her breasts, they are split apart, her chest is as bony as a boy's.)

Joanne rotated her head under a different faucet: How could I tell what's holding you together? It could be me, washing my hair in the sink, while you wonder how you slipped through your own fingers.

The Emperor

Montreal is a city of fusions. It is stone, glass, brick, cement, steel, asphalt, desire, copper, paper, dream, wood, plastic, fused onto the tricorn, river-embedded extrusion of a dead volcano.


As a child, Joanne assembled the parts in increments, appending streets and districts as she learned their names, until she had invented a viable map of her exterior.

The growth of her hair paralleled the acquisition of knowledge; each trimmed-off inch of split ends corresponded to something forgotten, not lost but efficiently removed.

At fifteen she wanted to paint a creased face with baggy eyes on the side of every building. Her body had stopped growing, arrested in mid-bloom. However carefully she applied her make-up or chose her clothes, she always looked in disarray, like an unplanned garden haphazardly pruned. She was considered odd, for she was earnest and rarely smiled.

She discovered late that she was not alone, that people with intense frowns climbing into taxis had not noticed her.

It is a city of definitions. Studying an atlas, she realized that geography is as personal as dreams.



Years ago, Herold walked part way up Mount Royal. Here was the mystical center of the father who spewed lava and ash. He reached a chest-high rock that had a plaque nailed to it in someone's honor. Sitting on the rock he read The Myth of Sisyphus, waiting for someone to notice him. Then he would impress her (it would have to be a her) with his knowledge of the absurd. A man came by with a camera but he did not stop. When it got dark Herold went home.

From city to city, from pore to pore, the outline of the body is traced. The great bulk falls in a stupor across Asia, one knee bent sideways, arms outstretched, fingers curling upward from exposed palms. From every citadel's tower the vista is the same: serial streets expanding to the broken walls in a semblance of lash-marks or veins, the emptiness beyond. Between cities there is a nothingness that must be traversed, a despair linking oases of complacency. Alexander understands this and it keeps him marching; his desire suppresses his fear of hopelessness. Every city thus becomes one city, every forced march a return to the same place: the citadel from which the streets radiate to the walls that he himself has smashed, the upholstered couch in the draughty room, the good night's sleep on the perimeter of the void.

The image of each city, as he lies dreaming on his couch, is superimposed on those of cities that came before it so that there is only one city, planless, anarchic and ill-defined, alleys and lanes opening onto others in unexpected places, parks and squares appearing behind doors falling from their hinges, rooftops juxtaposed with sunken roads, the pattern of the whole forever undiscoverable. Thus the one city is a dream city, a nightmare of impossible debouchments and incomprehensible corridors, with a center that offers no rest and a circumference that is only an edge and not an exit.

The assertion that all cities are one city is so demonstrably false that it must be repeated constantly in order to appear credible, and even then its veracity is limited to moments of extreme mysticism or abasement or exhaustion, heightened or degraded imagination.

The fusion of Herold and Joanne into one living room, one kitchen, one bed and, alas, one bathroom turned out to be, by both their standards, not without moments of idyll. They ate out once or twice a week (The Bar-B-Barn, Pique Assiette, Chez William Tell); ordered in from Hong Kong House, assimilated (when not simulating) movies, took in a play or two at the Centaur and the Sadie Bronfman, all the while refining their dramatic technique in the company of a new co-star--and still found time to cartograph their mutual physiogomies, eliminating one by one the fancied dragons and puff-cheeked

putti of unexplored countries, replacing these with finely contoured, new-world delineations of the limits of intrepid discovery.

Joanne was bored when Herold began spending more time in such minutiae of his profession as correcting exams and grading papers; but she suffered this inattentiveness without whine or plaint, although he did seem curiously expectant of a hostile reaction. When his academic commitments became less pressing she submitted to long afternoon walks (the weather having turned benign) which were studded with nuances of Great Moments in History like cloves in a ham. Walking from the Metro to the Centaur Theatre, for example, he observed en passant that the clock atop the old Sulpician seminary that abutted Notre Dame was the oldest public timepiece in North America, a fact which impressed her more than the declaimed intelligence that the order of Grey Nuns, whose convent at Guy and Dorchester they often passed, was founded by one Madam d'Youville in 1730.

The double palisades of Thebes provide no protection as the Macedonians make their way along the sunken road that leads to the temple. The Thebans are massacred in their houses, pulled from their closets and bedrooms and flung from their own windows into the streets where the carts of pedlars still clutter the passageway. No child is spared, no woman unmolested. They are dragged from the altars to which they cling, slaughtered as their voices cry for divine succor. Only Pindar's house is passed over, for Alexander loves poetry. Slumping on their terraces, the survivors are sold into slavery. Alexander admires the Pythian Odes, so the descendants of Pindar are allowed to escape just before the city is burned to the ground.

Herold decided it was better not to be hysterical. After arguing with his wife he would be ashamed of his high-pitched squealing. Each time he resolved to be calm the next time, so as to appear wise and, perhaps, long-suffering. The next time he would fly off the handle at the slightest provocation and then he would be ashamed again. He realized that if he couldn't change his temperment he could perhaps exploit it. He became hysterical at every opportunity, forcing his voice to ever squeakier octaves. He did it to spite himself. Now he assumed he was cured and knew how to look intelligent.

The city is a book, he said.

Here comes a conceit, Joanne said, by way of the seventeenth century.

They got their name, les Soeurs Grises, a pun on the word for drunk, by the way, because some of the inhabitants accused them of selling liquor to the Indians, and, as one would expect, of helping them drink it.

That explains that.

The dimensions of Troy are irrelevant: by now it is only an idea. Its taverns and brothels and barracks and decaying palace indicate that it is part of the City, but it is the most ethereal part, the mythic quarter of memory and invention. For this reason it must be assimilated differently so that Alexander, too, can partake of the myth. He sacrifices to Athena, he exchanges his armor for some weapons left over from the Trojan War. He is crowned with gold. He concedes that Achilles was a lucky man to have had Homer for a biographer. All the while he is congratulated for having come into Asia, for continuing in the footsteps of his father, whom he despises.

One morning, years ago, he sat outside on a lawn chair. The back yard was very small, surrounded by massive hedges and untamed trees. He had on an old hat that he used to wear when he worked in the garden and he was calmly smoking a cigar. The trees were full of birds that came and went but one particular bird never left its perch. Herold watched it for a long time, bobbing its head, lifting its wings a little, complacent in the sun. Finally he threw a stone at it and it flew away.

One time Joanne made a remark about the arrogance of American tourists (she had just finished Margaret Atwood's Surfacing) which elicited an in-depth explanation of the lack of a Canadian mythology and the fictionalization of American history to bring it into line with basically Greek conceptions of gods and demi-gods.

No mortals among them, Herold said.

Now we exchange dialogue, Joanne said. Like in a French movie.

I'll stop.

No you won't.

(At Ephesus the streets are divided into several thoroughfares running east-west and others running north-south. Between these main arteries the side streets are laid out. In passing from point to point, therefore, one always has a choice of many alternate routes from which to choose so that it is possible, within limits, to avoid repetition. At some point, the rulers of the city blockaded several intersections in order to channel traffic along preordained, easily regulated byways, an improvement that the citizens found irritating. When Alexander comes, he demolishes the roadblocks, and the exultant Ephesians slaughter their former rulers in an orgy of rediscovered freedom. Later, they are grateful to Alexander for restraining their exuberance before they had a chance to exterminate too many innocent victims in the joyful flush of indiscriminate vengeance.

Herold always envied Frederick Barbarossa, but he did not like him much. Then Frederick drowned on his way to the second Crusade. There was a logic to that, a pleasing symmetry: the warrior king struck down by chance before he could defend his warring god, his red beard matted to his face, his cheeks swollen and blue in the river.

Miletus, natal city of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. Aristotle says that all things are full of gods. Miletus is full of lawyers and thieves.

Miletus, the liquid city where everything that exists is alive. In this city of total vivification everything is questioned, nothing assumed, myths like Alexander denigrated, realities like Alexander venerated. Here Anaximander drew the first map of the world so that men like Alexander could figure out where they were going, where they wanted to go next, and what it would cost them to get there. In Miletus it is believed that things are created through a process of separation and maintain their predominance through injustice. Alexander is welcome here for he proves the rule; besides, all things return to unity and quietude in time and when he subsides there will still be the water and the air. Miletus, the flatulant city where the buildings and the streets, the markets and the courthouses and the temples, breathe and fart.

In Miletus one is ever conscious of these things, not because they are self-evident but because they are legislated. In a city of lawyers even nature and the nature of reality must be regulated. Appeal is possible but judgment is final. These Miletian lawyers are quite

content in their profession, not only because it affords them a high standard of living (for their services are always in demand), but because they risk nothing in their disputes but pride. These disputes are ubiquitous and can be witnessed on streetcorners, in shops, in brothels and temples. The participants view them as a kind of internecine game from which the general population is excluded. This exclusivity contributes to their individuation, their sense of separateness. And everyone who is not a lawyer is a thief, whose means of livelihood is always suspect (only the practice of law is considered respectable), and who is in constant need of prosecution or defense. This is not an unreasonable assumption and the lawyers have no difficulty in rationalizing it: merchants steal by extracting unjust profits, workmen cheat their bosses by giving less of themselves than the total servitude and loyalty for which they are paid, physicians and priests delude the public with spectacle and abstruseness. Only the law is just and only lawyers justly remunerated, for they provide a service at once indispensable and inescapable.

When Alexander enters Miletus he is welcomed and praised. Although he is not a lawyer he is a judge, and it would be absurd to assume that one so powerful could possibly be a thief.

Herold and Joanne exchanged palpitations, often but unmagically, inaudible whispers, insensate grindings without hedonistic flair, prefaced by desultory dialogues and warp-drive foreplay that eventually progressed from the supererogatory to the supercilious. In the twilight of their ardor they bumped into each other in the dark.

Herold told Joanne that he was easily scared, that panic was his business, that if she were attacked he would be unable to defend her. Shocked, she exclaimed that surely he would try. He said he would run. She said that was nice to know. He told her that a fragment of such knowledge was not such a good thing, really, that you reach a point where it's not enough to know. You want others to know that you know so you tell them. In this way you have meaning, he said. She asked him what that was and he told her it was a lie of no small magnitude.

The markets of Halicarnassus are abundantly stocked. One can procure any manner of vegetable, viand or service. Here it is common, because of the complexity of choice, for everyone to temporarily specialize in the consumption of one particular item. Thus there is a man who eats nothing but tomatoes during the first ten days of summer. Another subsists on figs for the seven days following his birthday. There is a woman, famous for the massive bone of her nose that causes the rest of her face to appear squashed, who eats only cold lamb that has been marinated in garlic and oregano for a fortnight. There are those who will eat nothing but chicken. This habit of specialization extends to all forms of consumption. There are men who will only sleep with overweight women with long dark hair. Others prefer boys with shaved heads. This makes for a certain orderliness in the large central agora, for there is none of the general pushing and squabbling that one suffers in the markets of other cities. When one tires of one's specialty, one is permitted to adopt another, provided there is one available, and the process of rotation is constant and well-regulated. Still, even in the most systematically organized societies there are those who must go against the grain, motivated perhaps by an incorrigible malice or an unforeseen need to spite

the general good. These types must have a bit of everything and are selfishly discontent with their place in the scheme of things, no matter how exalted it may be. Sometimes, if they enforce their deprivations with sufficient self-confidence, they are honored as heroes. More often they are assumed to be lunatics and confined accordingly.

It used to hurt but now it's soft, she said of his beard.

It's mellowed.

Tom says we'll be divorced in two weeks.

Congratulations. There'll be a reception, of course.

I'll get drunk.

You'll scramble your senses.

Too bad I like you better when I'm sober.

That's not what you say when you're drunk.

Now he was crazy for ice cream. He would regain the weight he had lost by eating several pints of it a day. He would will himself to do it as he had willed himself to stop. Joanne would be strong and have courage while he succumbed to unmediated desire. This is what he told himself. He would take her face between his hands and say: Look, now I'm not hungry anymore.

He asked Joanne what she did in a typical day. She said she got up, then washed. He asked her how she washed. She didn't understand the question. He pointed out that surely she must piss first, as he himself had had occasion to observe. She said, starting over, that she lay in bed for five minutes or so, coming awake, then got up, pissed, washed and had a drink of water or maybe a glass of juice. He asked her again how she washed, if there was some unvarying order to the way she did it, or if the process was random from day to day. She told him that first she got some fresh towels, then she took a shower, washing first her hands, then her face, then her neck, working her way down her body, leaving her feet and anus for last, then her hair, then she turned off the shower and brushed the excess water from her hair, then she dried her body, then her ears (with toilet paper), then she blew her nose, then she brushed her teeth, then she dried her hair, then she ate a piece of toast. He asked her if it was exactly the same every day. She said she supposed it was a habit. He inquired about the toast. She said she ate it with butter, flour sugar and cinnamon. Again he asked if this routine never varied. She said that sometimes she skipped the toast or indulged in an English muffin.

At Siwah Alexander visits the reknowned shrine of Ammon. It is situated in an oasis surrounded by a desert inhabited only by snakes and crows. The site of the shrine is remarkable for the unusual character of its climate. The warmest time of day is midnight, when the heat is virtually unbearable, while at noon the sun, which is as ferociously bright here as elsewhere in North Africa, presides over the coldest portion of the daily cycle. This phenomenon, not surprisingly, is attributed to the whim of the god who is worshipped there. The local priests, ever mindful of the incomprehensible, greet Alexander as Ammon's son, a deification which he has no trouble accepting, having often been bemused by the mysterious depths of his own nature.

A definite pattern begins to emerge, Herold said, coddling his genitals in a Facelle Royale.

Like what?

I detect a certain decline in this lovemaking thing. A je ne sais quoi pas. Workmanlike, but.

Should I be insulted, or what?

No, but one wonders.

What a bastard of a thing to say.

An innocent observation. In extremis post coitum.

Not to hurt your feelings or anything.

Not at all, asshole.

He told Joanne that he, too, did the same things the same way every day. He wondered what would happen if he got up some morning and changed the order of things; if, for example, he shaved the left side of his face first instead of the right or of he trimmed his mustache before he shaved his neck. She observed that the question was somewhat academic as he now had a beard (he had hoped it would be red but it wasn't). He said that it was just as well, since he was always afraid to disrupt the pattern in case such wanton willfulness, such early morning hubris, might bring him bad luck. She was surprised to discover that he was so superstitious. He confessed that he suffered from a thousand superstitions, instituted primarily to counteract the possible ill effects of any arbitrary, perverse act of defying his own systems. He went on to describe in some detail his secret vice of wood knocking. For years (since high school) he had been knocking on tables, chairs, counterbottoms, wall moldings, etc., without even thinking about it. Sometimes he caught himself tapping on something wooden with the tip of his middle finger, always in the same rhythm: two short taps, pause, two more short taps, pause, two long taps. He couldn't help himself. He couldn't stop doing it. Some-

times when he was doing it consciously he would try to stop. Usually he would be thinking of something he was afraid of, like going to prison or getting mugged or becoming impotent. When he told himself that it was stupid and that he shouldn't be killing thousands of fingertip cells in pursuit of such folly, the thought of the thing he feared would fill him up, preoccupy him until he relented and commenced tapping. It was, he said, the only way he could get those fears out of his mind: tap-tap, tap-tap, tap, tap. He grew more and more afraid that if he didn't do it, the bad things would happen. It seemed like such a small price to pay to avoid the unthinkable: six taps and he was safe. It was like an abstract kind of prayer.

Upon entering Babylon one is immediately conscious of two peculiarities: there are a great number of ghosts in the city, and also an exceptionally large force of prostitutes lining even the most humble streets. Every building seems to be haunted, the air is filled with the half-heard dialogues of invisible interlocutors, the uneasy feeling of being constantly under surveillance is pervasive, even in moments of apparent solitude. In Babylon one is never alone. All of the buildings are very ancient, no new edifice having been erected within living memory nor, indeed, within the last two centuries.

Most of the streets are somewhat too narrow for contemporary carts to traverse without difficulty, for the axles of these modern vehicules are made rather larger than in former times and, in any case, are all of foreign manufacture. This tends to cause a virtually permanent traffic jam and on some days there is no movement at all. The Babylonians are somewhat embarrassed by this, for they are convinced that their ancestors are observing their every action (or inaction) and enumerating with disgust their every flaw. Once convinced that their imperfections are insurmountable, however, they feel free to abandon themselves to every form of licentiousness, it being inevitable that they can never hope to match the high standards of their forefathers no matter what they do, and this accounts for the flourishing trade in sexual favors. In Babylon Alexander communes with the shadow of Achilles, and, knowing that he can never emulate the illustriousness of his model, all but succumbs to the city's characteristic self-abandonment.

~~A~~Abed, he eyed her striding across the room. He noted her disproportions, her posture, the lack of fine tuning in her skin and bone structure, the heavy fall of her feet. It put him in mind of the way she groomed herself, the meticulous application of color, highlight, hyperbole of lash and brow. Transfixed in mirrored concentration, solipsistic among brushes, pencils, applicators, vials of viscous, bottled beauty and nostril-searing bases and polishes, she was lost to him, as he supposed he was lost to her, trimming his toenails into the bathtub, forgetting to flush them away. Was this so different from the uxorial travails of narcissism he had benignly ignored for a fifth of a century? Yes, actually, it was.

He asked Joanne if she and her husband had gone on a honeymoon. She told him they had gone to Greece. All she could remember, she said, was that it was blue and yellow and white. She said it was beautiful in the afternoon when no one was around, but that it was so hot she could remember only colors. No shapes. It was very basic for a while, she continued, and then Tom would want to go somewhere. She admitted that at night it was like any place else where people have a few drinks and exchange eroticisms, but during the day it was the greatest blue in the world.

Memory: the commingling shadows of trees splashing the ground, the sudden appearance of a stone half-wall, the thin layer of loose dirt on top of the wall, the bare ground on the other side, the weak sunlight thinly spread over the path.

Grosvenor at dawn, completely deserted, the sound of a bus accelerating on nearby Queen Mary Road.

On St. Helen's Island, walking along the river, the pointless lapping of the water, the immense cantilevers of the Jacques Cartier Bridge.

The heavy gargoyles lining the eaves, the rough grey stone of the building, the yellow windows, the sign: - WATCH OUT FOR FALLING ICE.

The red lipstick thickening Catherine's mouth, the thin line of her lips visible at close range, the greasy smear of the kiss.

He had decided at some point that history was an important thing to know. He was attracted by the abstractness of it: stripped of its color, of the incidentals of names, dates and places, there was a geometric beauty to it, a purity of form and line in the movements of mass migrations, the swelling and diminishing of peoples and nations, the sterility of pure strategy and diplomatic maneuver. It was reducible to elements that interrelated in a pattern of inevitability, sustained by recurring, ineluctable themes of hunger, space, exchange, aggression, power. It was self-reflexive: it was about itself, the artifice of its patterns were about nothing but themselves. History was a theory about itself. Nothing meaningful ever happened: it was just a question of glamour, of glamourizing the collective memory, and Herold did not believe in heroes, progress, great men, gods or glamour.

The city of Susa is dominated by the river upon the banks of which it is situated. This river does more than support the city's economy; it molds the consciousness of the inhabitants. They are a river people, superior in kind to all others; they are blessed with an unlimited freedom of egress should they come under attack from the landward side; their streets flow away from the river in broad boulevards that mimic the curvaceous meanderings of

of rushing water. The city is constructed in such a way that from every point the river is visible; thus, no building, especially near the waterfront, is allowed to be built too high and an artificial slope has been laboriously fabricated so that the entire city slants upward in tiers. Naturally, the gods that are worshipped here are river gods and the staple of the local diet is fresh-water fish. Alexander, impatient with such provincialism, orders the erection of huge silos behind the piers, so that the populace may enjoy bread made from imported grains. This, of course, obliterates all view of the river from all but the most elevated vantages, and severely dislocates the sensibilities of the Susians, who waste no time in dismantling the silos as soon as he is gone, and who subsist for months thereafter on grain-fed fish.

Joanne emptied him like a jar of jam. This is what he thought: she spread him on her toast and licked the knife.

Yes, Joanne, I am going to wander off. A week here, a week there, a change of venue. I shall spend my money in hotels, have my laundry done by sweaty young French girls with no teeth in infernal sub-basements.

Mobilized, he reshuffled his pack, demanded a redeal, sought the decisive hand that would win the pot. Only the stakes eluded him. He circled, he feinted, he yo-yoed, he aimed at the sun, but he found himself to be a creature of continents, not seas and skies. He zeroes in, testing his valence.

Well, what do you believe in?

Hard to say.

Do you believe in life after death?

I have no eschatological expectations, no.

You don't believe in heaven and hell?

I don't believe in heaven, no.

But you believe in hell?

I believe in damnation.

How about grace?

Grace is a good one. Goes with damnation, right?

So are you to be damned or saved?

I'm to ignore the whole thing and see what happens.

What do you think will happen?

My brain shrugs its shoulders.

Don't you think you could make something happen,
one way or the other?

I really hate to be presumptuous.

That sounds vaguely irresponsible.

Aha.

Like you don't want to have control of your own life.

So that's my problem.

Oh, stop it.

It stops by itself, sooner or later.

I'm going to leave you alone now.

Hey you.

Hey me what?

Try not to panic.

Persepolis is well known for the majesty of its buildings, which tend to be several storeys higher than those in other central Asian cities and employ far greater amounts of marble and granite. There is hardly a building in the entire city that is without a columned portico and an elaborate frieze on its entablature. This is the pride of Persepolis: that one can scarcely take a bath or buy a tenderloin of pork without participating in the ubiquitous grandeur. Every shop and every stable is a monument. Oddly, the people are not jaded by constant contact with such magnificence; although they pretend to be blasé and to take for granted the splendor of their daily surroundings, they are always reminding themselves

that they live in PERSEPOLIS, the world's finest, most exciting city (despite the high crime rate, slovenly state of public services and inevitable decrepitation of some of the older edifices), and that their personal sophistication is unparalleled. When they boast to outsiders that they are native Persepolites, they mean to inspire envy and awe, the same awe that they themselves feel toward their own situation, for they can hardly believe that they are so fortunate as to live here, in the capital of the world. They are somewhat insulted and confused, therefore, when Alexander, far from holding them and their city in the accustomed reverence, chooses to burn down some of their finest buildings, including that centerpiece of modern civilization, the palace of the Persian kings.

Herold thought he might like to be dead. The problem was that there were so few really appealing ways of realizing that thought. He thought of guns (too messy), ingesting massive amounts of toxic chemical substances (rather drawn out and unpredictable), opening his veins in a warm tub (a little too classical in a pretentious sort of way), and drowning (he would rather his life did not pass before his eyes, that his beard were not matted to his face, that his cheeks were not swollen and blue

upon discovery). Leaping from tall buildings was definitely out (too sensational), and taking wing in front of a rushing train was too disconcertingly literary (not to mention the unpleasantly suggestive symbolism). The means were undeniably ugly, although the end was not without its attractions. But he would never do such a thing, for fear of adding one more failure to an already tediously prolix list.

Be tolerant, he said at the door.

I'm glad you're back, Joanne said.

I'm possessed of an arcane prurience. It unhinges my synapses.

I'm flattered.

Memory in the making, consciously being constructed:

The sound of the timer going off on the stove. A tangle of tree roots and underbrush between two paths on the mountain. The smell of roasted chicken. The river at night, seen from a rooftop restaurant; their reflections in the window, smiling. The changing color of the bar-b-que sauce as it comes to a boil.

I got used to having you around.

Was not her voice the merest tad too nasal?

Me too.

In the sink the trimmings of his beard, which was now contoured to accentuate the shape of his face.

In his brain Catherine buzzed like a bee in a glass jar.

The public works of Pasargadae are its most outstanding feature. Indeed, it is a city of sewers. A vast network of clay and stone pipes lies beneath the streets and, in fact, forms an underground city in its own right, complete with inhabitants and a code of laws. These sewer dwellers often lounge on street-corners during midday, leaning up against the walls of buildings and temples, begging alms and mocking passers-by. At night they return to their subterranean dwellings: unused tributaries, abandoned shafts, the escarpment that bisects each pipeline which was originally intended to serve as a walkway for workmen and engineers. Every so often a study is done and statistics generated to prove that a greater percentage of the population resides in the sewer system than in the city proper. No steps are taken to alleviate this imbalance, however, for the sewer-dwellers perform the useful function of unjamming

blocked pipes and generally keep things flowing smoothly, as indeed they must to ensure their own comfort. So dependent, in fact, have the Pasargadaeans become on the ministrations of their fellow citizens underground that they have learned to bear with equanimity, and even with smiles and encouragement, the steady barrage of insults and mocking epithets that these derelicts level at them from every sidewalk all afternoon.

I'll never get married again, no matter how attractive the man is, no matter how great he is in bed, no matter how much he makes me laugh, no matter how well he cleans his teeth.

Under no circumstances?

No matter how intelligent he is, no matter how much pain he fails to cause me.

It became apparent, as his thought developed, that things broke down, became more discrete. History became a series of moments, a compilation of little meanings patched together, and the implicit truncation of cause and effect made the interior dynamics irrelevant. Those human elements, thoughts and feelings, that had previously shaped things lost necessity. The things now spoke for themselves, dictated their own unconceived patterns. The lines and colors that at one time were arranged to

depict specific referents--a tree, a nude, a bowl of fruit--were reduced to what they were: lines and colors. They were defined by their own minimalization; they were finally allowed to express their own reality without the burden of reflecting something other. They had become themselves. But this decomposition did not stop with the achievement of abstraction. It became distanced; eventually reality became more and more filtered until it lost shape entirely, and this chaos was a kind of cosmic psychosis. Breakdown was universal, recovery optional. Aha, Herold concluded, a recrudescence of hysteria that must be denied emotional hegemony.

At the heart of Samarkand lies an immense cemetery, virtually a city within the city. Each grave is marked identically with a small hexagonal obelisk about three feet high, on one face of which is carved, vertically, the name of the deceased and the dates of his life, the latter reckoned in years from the founding of the city. The graves are divided into blocks of lots, separated by wide, tree-lined lanes. These blocks are segregated according to social class, occupation, manner of death and degree of contribution to the development of the city. The place of greatest honor is reserved for those who died in battle, followed by city officials and public administrators, aristocrats, tradesmen and, lastly, the

insolvent. Women are buried separately, harlots in one block, all others in another, with the former being marginally more exalted. Among the living it is a matter of the gravest urgency where one will be buried; every ambition is directed toward procuring a greater post-mortem status than one's fellows. In this regard the female residents are faced with a paradox, seemingly designed to test their ingenuity: although whores are treated with greater respect after death, they are universally reviled while alive. Thus no woman actively chooses this profession unless she possesses the moral courage to sacrifice worldly honor for posthumous reward, and that is the reason why she is so respected after death.

He leaned back against the plush of the chair and experimented with the near and distant focus of his eyes, watching first the river, then their reflection in the window, then the river, then Joanne's face which was partially obscured behind a haze of smoke.

Begin with a mountain. In this light (there is none) it is only a father. Around its slopes construct a glamorous and timeless city. This is Ecbatana, a city of embellishments. Carved heads jut from the cornices of every building, monumental columns carved in bas-relief with historical and mythological scenes punctuate each intersection, no post or fixture is considered finished until it is embroidered with flowery excrescences and elaborate ornamentation in the form of carved vines and superfluous bronze trellises. Strangely, none of this brilliant but useless decoration is visible unless one stands right next to it. From a distance the city presents an aspect of implacable severity and coldness, to which the huge central mountain contributes the greatest part. The inhabitants, too, convey an impression of distance and lack of warmth, and tend to be laconic and sarcastic. Only when one knows them better does it become obvious that they are rather overly fond of rhetorical flourishes, for, like their city, they give nothing to the uninitiated.

Joanne was asleep when he came into the room. She wore only a bra and panties, exposed to draught and loss of heat. She was beautiful, of course, as all sleepers are, awash in flickering Late Show light from the television. He covered her with a floral sheet that did not match the pillowcases, tucking the end around her feet. They were dead, unresponsive to tickling strokes, white, red-taloned, cold. He watched her body carve a groove of warmth into the sheet, her eyelids vibrant with dreaming, as the icy, spastic TV beam irradiated her. His hands were wet, his legs shook: he was free.

Each body in the crowd--perhaps unconsciously but nevertheless perceptibly--stiffens when he appears. Each body is wary, fearing and hoping that it will be noticed, bracing itself for an unexpected blow. When nothing happens it is as if a great victory has been won, an arduous task brought to a successful conclusion.

It is the lack of solemnity that is disquieting.

And Bagoas, dancing in the open air beneath the white buildings. A few banal words are exchanged among the spectators, whose conversation is strangely lacking in animation.

It is the same wherever they march, all cities being one city, Alexandria, Alexandrianopolis.

Interlude

The end of snow was the beginning of--what?

High fashion on the boulevard, so to speak. Long-haired French girls in high-waisted skirts and crisp blouses on St. Catherine St., well-coiffed hangers-out spilling from sidewalk bistros, warm nights of well-groomed excitement?

Something like that.

St. Denis St. debates on the comparative wisdom of Marcuse and Malraux, Sartre and Barthes, Levesque and talk show hostess/maitresse du culture Lise Payette?

There was that.

Other manifestations of equal insignificance, together with a general feeling that winter is really a plot cooked up in some demented cosmic imagination?

That, too.

Locus: Paul Bradley's kitchen.

Present: Paul Bradley, Alan Sansavar.

Absent: Joanne Harrington.

The Deal: The cards are dealt face down in the layout known as the Celtic Cross.

Describe Paul: He has cancelled dreams of long yachts and lazy days of mixing metaphors in tropical foreign climes, although poetry is still as good a line as any, and better than most, for knocking off a quick piece.

Describe Alan: He has the big connection, the open wire to outer space in a metabolic rush of intellection, the occult flow of supra-sanity along the open-switched gauge of the Grand Enigma Solved: the key unriddled, the way illumined, the prophet despised, naturally, but not in his own kitchen.

Dialogue follows.

We should really choose a female card, seeing as she is in absentia, as it were, which limits us--well, actually, it doesn't limit us very much at all. Something appropriate, though. Let's see. Not Temperance, surely. Hmm. Here we go. La Papesse. The High Priestess to you.

Wait a minute. What's this high priestess business?

Oh, a number of things. There's this sort of spurious legend about Pope John VIII, that he was really a woman from Mainz, I think, named Johannes Angelius. There's a connection right there. Died in childbirth, apparently.

Doesn't seem terribly relevant somehow, except for the name.

Well, the story's apocryphal anyway.

The High Priestess

She talks to Herold. He loves her, doesn't he?
He's old: gone fifty. It doesn't matter. He knows all the tricks, but he pretends to have forgotten them. Sometimes he's there and sometimes he isn't. He moves in and out. She doesn't care. She doesn't know where he goes when he's gone but that's okay. He's in touch with his wife. She doesn't mind. His wife would like him to come home to her; maybe he's trying to make up his mind. Jealous? No, not anymore. He's weak, the poor bastard.

How did it happen?

She guesses it was her fault. He had his eye on her, though. She wanted him (he had class, ha ha). The rest was clear enough.

She talks to him. He loves her.

I do, you know.

I think you do.

You think I'm confused. I'm trying not to burden you. I don't want you to think you have to put up with me.

I was wondering. I mean, why you come and go.

I don't want you to think I'm trying to take over your life.

What happened that you don't love your wife?

Is it important?

Is it because she made you feel small when she left?

Do you want me to love her?

I want you to do what you want.

I want to do what I want.

She talks to Herold. He gives her little smiles (teeth still good, a gap between the two front ones) and does things with his eyes that she supposes are meant to be endearing. Maybe they are. She must have picked him for a reason.

Alexander and Aristotle walk through the city, which, like many others, is named Alexandria. They pass through streets and gardens, groves and squares; they stand on balconies and gesture at the view; they light torches to illuminate subterranean passageways; they climb staircases and run jerkily down ramps.

Almost the entirety of the Aristotelian opus dates from the period 334 to 323 B.C.; that is, from Alexander's invasion of Asia to his death a decade later.

There are three types of science, Aristotle says as they rest on a stone bench: creation, which is teleological; action, which is self-sufficient; and theory, which is self-reflexive. The latter is superior, for the man who engages in it needs nothing but his own mind.

I am that man, Alexander says. There is nothing outside the city, except mirrors which reflect the city, and the city is my imagination.

The city is a part of nature, Aristotle says, and not of law. It is inherent, not statutory. Whoever lives without a city is either higher or lower than a man: a beast or a god. And each city is separate and independent, self-sufficient unto itself.

No, Alexander says. There is only one city and I am its bestial god.

When Herold is gone she eats rather poorly: a hot dog here, a salad for lunch, lots of bread. And sweets. The creamy kind: fat mochas, petit fours, milles feuilles. She doesn't have to worry about her weight. She wishes she had a dog, like Pluto, her mother's Great Dane. He would put his head on her lap and she would kiss him on the nose. She let him lick her mouth. She loved him, didn't she?

She is ready. A suitcase is packed. It's a heavy one, even empty. She sits in a chair and looks at it; it's as solid and as at-home as a piece of furniture. All she has to do now is decide on a destination and a mode of transportation.

She goes into the bathroom and looks at the pills in the cabinet. Each bottle is from a different drugstore. There doesn't seem to be very many.

She sits on the toilet set and paints her nails Chinese Red. There is a lot of noise from the traffic outside. There is a streetlamp right outside her bedroom window and when she goes to sleep at night she has to bury her face in a pillow.

Hi, Joanne, how are you?

I don't feel well.

What's wrong?

I've been throwing up.

There's flu going around. Are you alright?

Sure, Mom. How's Pluto?

He misses you.

Pluto was destroyed years ago. After her second divorce, Joanne's mother couldn't stand having him around.

He was always underfoot, leaping on her whenever she appeared, oblivious to her commands. She had to close

the doors to all the rooms in the house so that he wouldn't rip them apart, carry pieces of clothing or cushions from room to room, or let go with an unexpected urination.

She grew tired of always having to remember to close the doors behind her whenever she went from the bedroom to the kitchen. She didn't want to live behind closed doors just because some stupid animal didn't have the sense to leave her alone. And the house was a wreck. Left to his own devices (such as they were), Pluto chewed up all the carpeting on the stairs, so that she was ashamed to have anyone in. So she had him put away, had the house recarpeted and repainted, learned to play bridge, and told herself that Pluto had gone to live in the country with a nice family that let him play outside all day, where there was plenty of space for him to run around in, cool air (he sweated a lot), and other au naturel benefits conducive to his doggie fulfillment.

Joanne decided that she was pregnant. The prophylactic foam she had been using since her separation from Tom (Paul: This stuff is disgusting; Herold: Kind of a mood killer, isn't it?) had obviously let her down. Her gynecologist concurred (Congratulations, Mrs. Harrington!). She thought it would be a great injustice to have the thing scraped out of her womb, although it was barely into the reptilian phase of its development. On the other hand, it made her nervous to think of it growing

inside her like a pinch of yeast in warm water. It would be born in March: a Pisces, like her.

I miss him. Don't you?

You should see the house. It looks brand new.

I had all the wooden mouldings varnished.

I'll have to stop by.

Her mother smoked cigarettes with charcoal filters. She kept them in the refrigerator so they wouldn't go stale, but they did anyway because she only smoked two or three a day. Every afternoon she drank a demitasse of Turkish coffee and ate a piece of halvah.

I got a new glass table for the patio. We can sit outside.

I've decided to go to Toronto, Herold said. I've applied for a post at York.

What made you do that?

It was either that or buy a motorcycle and head for the Rockies. But I really don't see the point in that kind of thing. It's not imperative to change that radically. This way I can just sort of slip into something comfortable and still recognize myself.

Well, good luck.

Don't you want to come?

You want to take me with you?

I think that might be nice.

Don't you think I'm happy where I am?

She went out to the balcony where he sat peering at the traffic.

Do you think I'm getting fat?

You look fine to me.

I've put on about five pounds.

It doesn't show.

Look at this. (She grabbed an inch of flesh at her side and rolled it between her fingers.)

Well, what do I know.

Three large trucks rumbled past.. Herold scrutinized them closely, as if they were carrying his most precious belongings.

You love this place too much to leave it, Joanne said.

I wish I did.

Last night I had a dream that I was repeating a phrase to myself, over and over. It's not what is that counts, but what if. Not is, if.

What does that mean?

I have no idea.

You're dreaming in color. Isn't that what the French say?

One of us is.

In less than a year she had moved four times: from Tom's to Paul's to the Watson's in New York to Dorchester. Now she might move again, to Toronto with Herold.

How do you think I feel? she said to her mother, who was looking at a partially defoliated tree that had been one of Pluto's favorite pissoirs.

Like a gypsy.

Like a tennis ball.

Like a migrating bird?

Oh, stop it.

Those crab apples are in pretty bad shape.

Late in the evenings, when the bar was almost empty, Joanne put down her tray and had a few drinks. At a certain point she would feel that she couldn't hold any more without getting sick but by then she was usually drunk. At home she filled her refrigerator with food and ate as often as possible. She filled herself until it hurt, until she had eradicated every trace of hunger, every last murmur of appetite. She let herself be picked up by strangers in the bar and let them fill her up, too, with their small talk, ambitions, failures, lies, abuses, charm, quirks and silences. She read as many

books as she had time for: Beautiful Losers, The Alexandria Quartet, Anna Karenina, Good Morning, Midnight, Henri Troyat's biography of Tolstoy, the diaries of Anais Nin.

July 28. I haven't had a diary since high school. Whom does one write for? Don't you always expect that someone will read it years later? How can you be honest under those circumstances? My high school diaries are lost. I think I threw them away. I would be ashamed of them now. They were full of the usual adolescent stuff, boys I was in love with. When I first met Paul he showed me his diary, just as Tolstoy showed his to his fiancé. Tolstoy claimed to have done it out of a need for absolute honesty, so that the woman would know what she was getting. Paul did it, I'm sure, out of pride in himself. So did Tolstoy, probably. Today I skipped lunch and I was hungry all day. After work I ate a smoked meat and french fries at Dankoff's. The guy I was with said he was a software salesman. All he had was a cup of coffee. He lived in a high-rise on the corner of Guy and Maisonneuve. He said there was a pool in the building. I heard his neighbors fighting all night long. Summary: he was an undistinguished lover--no stars. What did he think about while he was doing it? His eyes were closed, it must have been something. I didn't come.

He felt really bad about it but what could he do? I was a stranger, a write-off. He said I should call him up sometime and come use the pool. Too bad I can't swim. Today I'm going to try to make coconut meringues. I hope it's not too damp. He told me I looked lonely. I told him I liked myself too much for that. He had a picture of Gurdjieff on his wall.

I don't see any point in going to Toronto.

Oh.

It seems stupid to me.

If you cared about me you would come.

If you cared about me you would stay.

I don't care for that rhetorical kind of reasoning.

I don't care if you care.

You're just trying to start an argument.

So what?

Joanne cleaned house. She indulged in a spree of discarding the irrelevant: old clothes, notebooks, bank books, obsolescent term papers, textbooks, trinkets she had carted for years from place to place. The hardest things to throw away were photographs but these, too, were ruthlessly dumped: herself as a child in a too-short white dress (now grey in the picture), holding a large ball, crying; a group shot of children in pointed party

hats, sitting around a table waiting for her to cut the cake while her mother, smiling, held a large-hilted knife in Joanne's recalcitrant fingers; Tom leaning against an abstract sculpture in the park across the street from the National Gallery in Ottawa, ankles crossed, hands in pockets, hair clumping over his forehead, a nervous smile; Tom, coming out of the kitchen, beaming, a tall gin fizz raised to toast the camera; Paul in his underwear, leaning over a typewriter on top of a stack of newspapers on a coffee table, a cigarette dangling self-consciously from his mouth--l'écrivain; Paul behind the desk of the hotel where he worked, his shirt open to the waist, grinning; a shot Paul left behind of a prostitute leaning on the desk, her face invisible behind huge round sunglasses; Herold in his canvas hat, pointing a finger at his temple like a gun, his grizzled cheeks puffed out with air; herself looking straight into the lens, her head tilted, her lips sucked in at the corners, impatiently. It was a great pleasure to throw things away, neaten existence, organize the remaining necessities into tidy compartments. Her aborted diary went along, too, along with a dollar map of Metropolitan Toronto.

My mind is a blank, Alexander says, that I must fill with a tracery of roadways more random than anything encountered in nature.

Beside him lies Hephaestion, his naked torso hatched with purple scars and yellow bruises, his eyes already closed in sleep.

Each city that I enter, Alexander continues, becomes a part of the one city which my imagination continually invents, the consummate Alexandria. Because Alexandria contains all cities, the particulars of any individual city can be derived from it. It includes, comprises, in fact, the avenues of Ephesus, the melifluousness and stench of Miletus, the agoras of Halicarnassus with their endless baskets of olives and dates and row after row of freshly slaughtered carcasses suspended on hooks, the mobs of industrious laborers in Gordium, dusty with the toil of centuries, the temples and shrines of Siwah, the ghosts and whores and torturous alleys and cul-de-sacs of Babylon, the clear river and sloping suburbs of Susa, the skyscrapers of Persepolis, the sewers and derelicts of Pasargadae, the forbidding mountain and minutely worked adornments of Ecbatana, and the immeasurable burial grounds of Samarkand.

Hephaestion, motionless on the camp bed, breathes quietly through his mouth. Alexander holds his hand an inch from the sleeper's lips to feel the warm breath on his palm.

And yet the city is never complete, Alexander says. There is always something missing, often the tiniest detail that one would never notice except by its absence. It already exists somewhere else, perhaps beyond the Oxus or the Indus. There is always another city, the hidden wonders of which can only be discovered, not invented. I dream of a city that is all-inclusive, sitting on the edge of a river, constructed around a great hill capped with an acropolis, full of high towers and sunken streets, where anything conceivable can be bought or leased, a city of theatres and libraries and taverns, a city with a memory.

Hephaestion is awake now, listening to his lover's voice.

That is every city, he says. They are all the same, all alike.

That is true, Alexander says, because I dreamt them all. Before me, they were all different. Now they are twists of the same convoluted dream, inside this tent: these hundred square feet are Alexandria, are Alexander.

She counted the pills. Now there were enough. She sent them down with ginger ale. She didn't look back: that would have been undignified.

Ultraviolet

Herold looks up from the silent TV to the mirror above the dresser. His face is a puffy mask, swollen from the fresh shave. Sitting naked on the edge of the bed his body seems too small for his head, bulbous with its dilated cheeks. He searches his suitcase for a cigar and finds some notes he has made for the class he is to give at York. He throws them away without reading them. There are no cigars; he has just smoked the last one, talking to Catherine on the phone.

Is this any way to live?

What do you mean?

I don't know.

Listen, I'm painting a picture of our living room. Why don't you come home and pose in it?

What I mean is, you have to keep your distance, filter it out. If you turn your back for five minutes, you're finished.

Why don't you just come home, Bill?

I don't have the answer to that one either.

He watches TV. He finds Channel 9: Cablevision. It's a show about belly dancers, filmed on location in a nightclub. The dancer on the screen has muscular,

heavy-veined forearms and a long black ponytail. He watches the intricate maneuvers of her hands, clacking cymbals like disembodied mouths talking to each other. He turns up the sound. The music is wild, beckoning, savagely insistent, hypnotic, a sinuous cocoon woven of pleading strings and driving rimshots. The dancer's red veil floats over a spectator's head, mussing his hair. It is music without intelligence, without form; raw, a music of pure instinct. The dancer is smiling as she spins away from the embarrassed spectator to the center of the floor, her hips grinding in perfect circles on intersecting planes, her ponytail swishing against the nape of her neck, her hands twisting on the pivots of her wrists like insane birds chained by the feet to their perches.

AGAINST ORTHODOXY:
NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION

Deane Sperdakos

6813276

September, 1981

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images . . .

I

It Must Be Abstract

Any theoretical approach to modern fiction is bound to prove inadequate, for the novel as it is written today (that is, the "art-novel"), and as it has been written since the time of Joyce, Proust, Kafka, et al., resists classification according to the old categories that sufficed for the long fiction of previous epochs. The criteria for judging the worth of the nineteenth-century novel, for example, (e.g., well-developed plot, rounded characters, realistically rendered milieu) no longer carry the same weight.

Modern literature can be characterized by three major trends: psychological penetration, emphasis on the low mimetic and preoccupation with form. These trends derive, in the main, from the ideas of Freud, Marx and modern physics.

We are now, it seems, in a period of "post-modernism." The psychological novel and the novel of social realism have gone the way of the naturalistic novel of the last century. We are left with a novel that is at once more empty, in the popular view, less accessible to the general reader, and more aesthetic, "pure," self-conscious and elitist.

The preoccupation with form is in part a reaction against the idea of "sensibility" that prevailed in the nineteenth century. For many modernists and post-modernists, technique is an end in itself, just as the development of sensibility was an end in itself in the last century (and the century before that). Furthermore, modern physics shattered man's image of the universe and disrupted him from his time-honored place in it. Our perception of reality was radically altered. It became evident that what is perceived is not necessarily an accurate picture of the world. As Wallace Stevens asserts in "Metaphors of a Magnifico," there are as many different realities as there are people: "Twenty men crossing a bridge,/Into a village,/Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,/Into twenty villages." The only thing that is ultimately real, according to Stevens, is the imagination that creates and orders accepted reality. If the world can offer no ultimate reality, if all reality is reducible to a pattern of mind, then that pattern supercedes whatever raw material it orders. It is not difficult to see how a new scientific sensibility could lead to a new artistic one.

The superficial eccentricities of modernist literature are of secondary importance. They do, however, reveal a dissatisfaction with the forms of the past that is indicative of the modernist feeling that the outmoded conventions

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represent an outmoded universe. But now the modernist universe itself has become outmoded. Modernist conventions are no longer adequate to express the needs or reflect the sensibility of a society that looks forward to a new understanding of itself, to a new (one hesitates to say it) complacency.

In his two essays, "The Dehumanization of Art" and "Notes on the Novel," Ortega y Gasset discusses some of the major trends in modernist art, including fiction, and points to some of the developments that would later become characteristic of post-modernism.

His first point is that the new art is unpopular. While this may have been true of the arts in general at the time of his writing (1948) it is not so true now. Having passed through a "stage of quarantine,"¹ the modernist style in painting and dance, for example, has become accepted, to the extent that works considered outlandish a generation ago are now canonical. Few still doubt the legitimacy of modern art. This same tolerance, however, has not been extended to the art of fiction. Avant-garde fiction is still considered peripheral by the majority of readers and even critics. While Picasso, Miro and Mondrian have entered the mainstream, have become, in fact, the new establishment,

writers like Beckett and Robbe-Grillet continue to go begging for want of readers, if not for want of critical attention, even when they are considered serious or major figures. Perhaps it is less demanding to spend a few moments looking at an incomprehensible painting than to spend several hours trying to read an incomprehensible book, but the fact remains that these books have not found favor among the public in the same way that these paintings have done. Thus Ortega was mistaken when he said that "modern art . . . will always have the masses against it."² Modern art is no longer as elitist as it once was; modern fiction, however, still is.

Ortega's explanation for the unpopularity of the new art is that it is "dehumanized." Traditional art appeals to the masses because of its human content; the public responds because it sees itself reflected in the work. "It thus appears that to the majority of people aesthetic pleasure means a state of mind which is essentially indistinguishable from their ordinary behavior."³ When the elements of form predominate over "human interest," the response is negative: "a work that does not invite sentimental intervention leaves them without a cue."⁴ The problem with this popular attitude is that it ignores the fact that art is art: "Not only is grieving and rejoicing at such human destinies as a work of art presents or narrates a very

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different thing from true artistic pleasure, but pre-occupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper."⁵

This is precisely where the art of the nineteenth century differs from that of the twentieth. The kind of realism espoused by such writers as, say, Zola and Trollope, or Jane Austen and Tolstoy, for that matter, a tradition that is far from dead as such contemporaries as Updike and Bellow demonstrate, is antithetical to aesthetic contemplation.

Works of this kind are only partially works of art, or artistic objects. Their enjoyment does not depend upon our power to focus on transparencies and images, a power characteristic of the artistic sensibility; all they require is human sensibility and willingness to sympathize with our neighbors' joys and worries.⁶

It should be noted at this point that the popular and critically well-received novels of the Updike/Bellow sort (one hesitates to say "school") do not necessarily represent the mainstream of current fiction. Other writers, such as Ronald Sukenik and the better known John Barth, have attacked the realistic tradition and defended the kind of fiction that repudiates it. "It's a question of breaking down the conventions of realism," Sukenik has said. "It's just that the novel is moving into new forms."⁷ Barth notes that a change of attitude is more important, and more lasting, than mere technical innovation. The authors he

prefers (Borges, Beckett, Nabokov, John Hawkes, Gass, Barthelme) share what he calls an attitude of "irrealism," and he predicts that this will become the major characteristic of prose fiction. As for realism, "I tend to regard it as a kind of aberration in the history of literature."⁸

This "aberration" of realism is what modern art has tried to efface in its quest to purify itself, to become dehumanized, which Ortega describes as

a progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production. And in this process a point can be reached in which the human content has grown so thin that it is negligible. We then have an art which can be comprehended only by people possessed of the peculiar gift of artistic sensibility...⁹

As he repeatedly emphasizes, "the new art is an artistic art."¹⁰

Moreover, there is really no point in trying to repeat the forms of the past. It is just as senseless to write a novel of manners, for example, as to compose another Wagnerian opera. It is some measure of the backwardness of literature, compared to the other arts, that contemporary examples of the former abound, while examples of the latter are virtually non-existent.

The modern artist strives to deform reality, to break down the possibility of intercourse between the work and the audience. The artist "leaves us locked in an abstruse universe, surrounded by objects with which human dealings are inconceivable, and thus compels us to improvise other forms of intercourse completely distinct from our ordinary ways with things. . . . This new way of life which presupposes the annulment of spontaneous life is precisely what we call understanding and enjoyment of art."¹¹

Like Barth, Ortega calls the art of the nineteenth century "a maximum aberration in the history of taste."¹² And again: "The imperative of unmitigated realism that dominated the artistic sensibility of the last century must be put down as a freak in aesthetic evolution."¹³ The new art is thus returning to a more natural, for it, mode of expression or attitude, the "will to style", for "all great periods of art have been careful not to let the work revolve around human contents."¹⁴

Modern art, partially because of the negative influence of the past, has become self-reflexive, ironical and imaginative.

Turning to Ortega's essay on the novel, we encounter a strange hypothesis, considering his seemingly positive interpretation of modern art in general: the novel, if not quite dead, does not have long to live; it is now, and has been for some time, in a state of decadence. Ortega contends

that the possibilities for the novel are becoming exhausted, that its limited resources have been mined to extinction. This argument, which has found other voices to declaim it in recent years, is superficial and unsubstantiated. What is usually meant by those who advance it is that the nineteenth century type of novel is dead, that the kind of fiction now being written cannot really be called "novels," as if the form was defined once and for all time 200 years ago. As a sop to those who believe this, Susan Sontag, to name just one critic, now speaks of the "post-novel," hoping, perhaps, that by using such a term the whole controversy may be side-stepped. This seems like a rather timid evasion of what is, after all, a non-issue. There is nothing in the history of ideas that precludes the evolution of an art-form. No one, for example, speaks of "post-painting," "post-sculpture," "post-music," or even "post-poetry," and yet changes in these arts have been even more radical than changes in fiction. Nor does anyone trouble to bemoan the death of these arts merely because their forms are now different. The most rational, unhysterical approach, one would think, would be to accept a broad definition of the novel, somewhat in the manner of E.M. Forster, as a long work of fiction in prose, and leave it at that.

As for Ortega's confident opinion that "it has become practically impossible to find new subjects,"¹⁵ one might

with equal confidence assume ~~that~~ over thirty years of subsequent fiction is sufficient evidence that he is wrong, and that the fiction produced in the next thirty years will prove wrong any who share his view in the present day.

It is, of course, impossible to exhaust all possible subjects and to say that one can do so, as Ortega does, is to assume that history stands still, that not only does human nature not change, as perhaps it does not, but that the world itself is completely static, that sensibilities are permanently arrested, that society is stagnant, and that no event worth exploring artistically can ever happen again. As Malcolm Cowley puts it, "life is the ultimate source of all fictions, even the most fantastic, and . . . in its blundering, dilatory, often secret way, it provides an infinite number of fables, renewed in substance and form for each new generation."¹⁶

(It is interesting to note that critics at the end of the eighteenth century also believed that the novel was played out, its technical possibilities exhausted.¹⁷ The novel, like Mercutio, is certainly taking a long time to die.)

Ortega's view is essentially naive. When he reads a novel he wants to be immersed in a world of the author's creation, but not a strictly aesthetic world. He wants the human world and thus has little faith in the art of dehumanization which he described with such perspicuity.

II

It Must Change

The tendency to dehumanization in fiction is most evident in the work of the New Novelists in France, whose leading spokesman, Alain Robbe-Grillet, has written several essays, collected in For a New Novel, on what these writers are trying to do. Dehumanization is also evident in recent Latin American fiction: Borges, Cortazar, Marquez, Manuel Puig, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, being some of the better-known names. In Italy there is Italo Calvino. Among American writers in this tradition, or anti-tradition, we might name Thomas Pynchon, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, John Hawkes, Gilbert Sorrentino, John Barth, and the expatriate Pole Jerzy Kosinski. All of these writers may be classified, if it is of any use to do so, as post-modernists. Their modernist predecessors include Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Beckett and Faulkner. Among these, by far the most influential have been Joyce, Kafka and Proust. The New Novelists, specifically Robbe-Grillet and Natalie Sarraute, have also cited Camus's L'Etranger as a key work in this lineage.

The ideas Robbe-Grillet expounds in his essays form an interesting extension of Ortega's philosophy of dehumanization, for they embrace the most extreme implications

of an anti-humanist--though not anti-human--art.

Robbe-Grillet claims to be astonished that young writers are expected to keep in mind the great novels of the past as models for their own work. As for the term "New Novel":

the expression is merely a convenient label applicable to all those seeking new forms for the novel, forms capable of expressing (or of creating) new relations between man and the world, to all those who have determined to invent the novel, in other words, to invent man. Such writers know that the systematic repetition of the forms of the past is not only absurd and futile, but that it can even become harmful: by blinding us to our real situation in the world today, it keeps us, ultimately, from constructing the world and man of tomorrow.¹⁸

Robbe-Grillet is not interested in replacing an old system of rules with a new one; his primary concern is to stress the freedom of the artist to operate according to his own rules and the freedom of the work to be autonomous.

There is no question . . . of establishing a theory, a pre-existing mold into which to pour the books of the future. Each novelist, each novel must invent its own form. No recipe can replace this continual reflection. The book makes its own rules for itself, and for itself alone.¹⁹

"The New Novel is not a theory," he says in a later essay, "it is an exploration."²⁰

Far from dictating rules, theories, laws, either for others or for ourselves, we have, on the contrary, come together in a struggle against laws that are too rigid. . . . We know only that the novel of today will be what we make it, today, and that it is not our job to cultivate a resemblance to what it was yesterday, but to advance beyond.²¹

Speaking of the American novel, Ihab Hassan makes a similar point. Because of the plethora of social subcultures in the modern world,

some contemporary novels are forced to create within the structure of their narrative a self-sufficient world of motives and manners that have little resemblance to the motives or manners a general reader may recognize. The structure of fiction, in other words, becomes more autotelic than the structure of the classic nineteenth-century novel. A fictional world created largely from within relies more heavily on the resources of organized form and universal symbols to attain dramatic objectivity; it is self-made, sometimes self-conscious, and not always self-evident. Its manners tend, therefore, to be self-reflexive.²²

In the essay "On Several Obsolete Notions" Robbe-Grillet attacks the traditional conventions of plot and character. Conventional critics recognize the true novelist by the vividness of his characterizations; yet none of the great modernist works are character studies, or psychological novels, including Nausea, L'Etranger, The Castle, and works of Celine, Beckett and Faulkner. "As a matter of fact, the creators of characters, in the traditional sense, no longer manage to offer us anything

more than puppets in which they themselves have ceased to believe. The novel of characters belongs entirely to the past, it describes a period: that which marked the apogee of the individual."²³ This less than a decade after Ortega announced that the psychological novel of character was the only interesting form of fiction left for the future novelist.

Furthermore, continues the imaginary critic, the true novelist is one who knows how to tell a story, one that is--must be--natural and life-like. According to Robbe-Grillet, the writer's strength is based on what he invents, what he creates solely from his imagination, without a model. "To tell a story has become strictly impossible."²⁴ Answering the charge that nothing happens in modern novels, he says:

Just as we must not assume man's absence on the pretext that the traditional character has disappeared, we must not identify the search for new narrative structures with an attempt to suppress any event, any passion, any adventure. The books of Proust and Faulkner are, in fact, crammed with stories; but in the former, they dissolve in order to be recomposed to the advantage of a mental architecture of time; whereas, in the latter, the development of themes and their many associations overwhelms all chronology to the point of seeming to bury again, to drown in the course of the novel what the narrative has just revealed. Even in Beckett, there is no lack of events, but these are constantly in the process of contesting themselves, jeopardizing themselves, destroying themselves, so that the same sentence may contain an observation and its immediate negation. In short,

it is not the anecdote that it lacking, it is only its character of certainty, its tranquility, its innocence.²⁵

Perhaps the best example of a totally dehumanized work of fiction is Robbe-Grillet's own novel, Topology of a Phantom City (1976), in which there is no plot, no characters and no message. In fact, there is scarcely anything "meaningful" (that is, amenable to interpretation) in it at all. Yet it succeeds entirely as a work of the imagination and is probably his best book to date. It is almost pure form.

Other examples of recent "dehumanized" novels include, in America, the work of Pynchon and Barthelme, to name just two. Novels like Gravity's Rainbow and The Dead Father are essentially plotless; things happen within their pages but there is a distinct want of causality. Nor do either of these books contain real characters in the conventional sense. The people who inhabit them are objects of manipulation, and although they generally speak and act in more or less sensible ways, they are not characters in the way the inhabitants of Tolstoy's novels are. Gravity's Rainbow is no more about people (as dramatized psychologies) than Mondrian's rectangles. And whatever plot there is is subsumed in the larger structures upon which books of this nature are built.

An earlier exemplar of this kind of fiction, in fact one of the direct ancestors of it, is Kafka. The Josef K. of his major works can hardly be considered a character according to any definition that E.M. Forster would be likely to accept.

Before leaving Robbe-Grillet and his fellow iconoclasts, it is worth noting that their revolt against the strictures of the past is entirely typical of writers and artists in every age that seeks new forms to express its own unique sensibility. Maupassant, for example, was equally offended by critics who attempt to legislate a fixed--and arbitrary--definition of the novel. Is it not better, he reasons, "to accept with equal interest those vastly different theories of art and judge the works they produce solely from the point of view of their artistic worth, accepting a priori the general ideas that gave them birth"?²⁶ As for rules of form, any "method of construction is perfectly valid on condition that all others are equally accepted."²⁷

III

It Must Give Pleasure

In a novel where the story and the characters are pre-eminent, the author casts himself in the role of transcriber or recorder of life. He merely translates experience of the world into a written codification, a faithful journalist of reality. In a novel that de-emphasizes the elements of plot and character, the author's role is rather to construct, to make an object. Where Dickens could rely on the intensity of his story and the vividness of his characters to sustain his fictions, the modern novelist must depend instead on the work's formal elements, on structure, shape and style. Form has replaced immediacy as the most important quality of well-made fiction.

To choose a style is to select a strategy of expression, to predetermine the kind of effect the work is to have on the reader, in a purely aesthetic sense: not the kind of effect the story will have on the reader's emotional response but the kind of effect the style, technique and structure will have on the reader's cognitive response. Aesthetic sensibility is not a type of emotion but a type of cognition. The greatest insights it can provide are into its own manner of being. Aesthetic pleasure is a response to the formal, not to the passionate. It is the object of form in art to organize passion into something intelligible to cognition.

Very often these structurss are perdeptual; that is, many modern novels are more concerned with showing ways of looking at things than with presenting the kind of specific reality that a traditional plot implies. Faulkner's novels illustrate this aptly. Absalom, Absalom! is an exercise in epistemology: the story unfolds and at the end we have some idea of what it was about, but we are never directly told what actually happened. Faulkner presents different sides of the same story, characters contradict each other in their accounts, the data are presented but the actual reality of events is missing. Technically, novels of this sort generally employ a shifting point of view or various narrators. Other examples from Faulkner include The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying. This method of construction, needless to say, would have been anathema to Henry James.

Point of view, and the epistemological questions which it raises, is a major concern of modern fiction. Modern physics has done much to dismantle old notions of the nature of reality, just as modern psychology has shattered the old image of the mind as unitary and rational. There is a prevalent belief that much of what is believed today will be nonsense in two centuries.

The ideas of Susan Sontag are interesting in this regard. She finds it philistine to concentrate, as most

criticism does, on the content or subject matter of a work of art. She is against interpretation because it seeks to discover behind any text a "sub-text which is the true one."²⁸ She considers this, in the current cultural context, "reactionary, impertinent, cowardly; stifling"²⁹ and argues that the text stands only for itself. "Interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else."³⁰ Instead, she suggests that the best criticism "dissolves considerations of content into those of form."³¹ Considering that writers themselves are today more interested in form, it is just a question of the critics catching up.

It is not surprising that this assessment is compatible with Robbe-Grillet's view that "it is in their form that their reality resides,"³² speaking of symphonies, paintings and novels.

The problem is that in the eyes of the public a concern with form implies coldness. However, this is wrong "the moment form is invention and not formula."³³

Concern for form tends to make of art an object detached from life, unsentimental, a thing in itself.

"A work of art encountered as a work of art is an experience, not a statement or an answer to a question. Art is not only about something; it is something. A work of art is

a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world."³⁴

Emphasis on technique is one of the most obvious and pervasive characteristics of art in this century. According to Wright Morris,

The history of fiction, its pursuit of that chimera we describe as reality, is a series of imaginative triumphs made possible through technique. . . . At the summit of technique we have such a craftsman as Joyce. . . . In Joyce the dominance of technique over raw materials reflects one crisis of the modern imagination. Raw material has literally dissolved into technique.³⁵

Sontag faults Ortega for stressing the aristocratic standards necessary for appreciating modern art. "All great art is founded on distance," she says,

on artificiality, on style, on what Ortega calls dehumanization. But the notion of distance (and of dehumanization, as well) is misleading unless one adds that the movement is not just away from but toward the world. The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a way of encountering the world, and of training or educating the will to be in the world. It would seem that Ortega and even Robbe-Grillet, a more recent exponent of the same position, are still not wholly free of the spell of the notion of 'content.' For, in order to limit the human content of art, and to fend off tired ideologies like humanism or socialist realism which would put art in the service of some moral or social idea, they feel required to ignore or scant the function of art.³⁶

Elsewhere, she declares that

it is facile, virtually meaningless, to demand that literature stick with the 'human.' For the matter at stake is not 'human' versus 'inhuman' (in which choosing the human guarantees instant moral self-gratification for both author and reader) but an infinitely varied register of forms and tonalities for transposing the human voice into prose narrative. . . . From this point of view, the decision of the old novelists to depict the unfolding of the destinies of sharply individualized characters in familiar, socially dense situations within the conventional notation of chronological sequence is only one of many possible decisions, possessing no inherently superior claim to the allegiance of serious readers. There is nothing innately more 'human' about these procedures.³⁷

IV

Ultraviolet is not a novel that was written to a program. No novel ever really is; any theory of fiction is almost invariably predicated on existing works. In examining his own place in the context of literature, in attempting to determine and define the principles he considers most useful or interesting, the novelist engages in a process of retrospection, deduction rather than induction, and, though he is usually loathe to admit it, self-rationalization. When a novelist (as opposed to a critic) theorizes about fiction, particularly his own, he invents and justifies: his wisdom is a lie. This is because no artist really believes in the validity of any system qua system; he can only be made to believe, at some cost to his freedom, in the utility of having one. When he is involved in the process of constructing his art, the artist concentrates on the work alone, with a blind faith that it will be self-justifying, authentic in its own unique fashion, and, if necessary, exemplify a legitimate, if singular, aesthetic.

In attempting to place this novel in some kind of pre-existing context, therefore, it has been necessary to create a tradition, or pseudo-tradition, that is perhaps artificial. Certain characteristics of the work, after its completion, struck the author as resembling features

of other works that had not been particularly influential during the writing. There were similarities between what the author was trying to achieve and what others before him had tried. There was to some extent a shared sensibility with other writers of the same general kind of fiction, a confluence at times of ideas and concepts, but at no time a wholesale adoption of anyone's theory. Some of the ideas that motivate the New Novelists are compatible with certain sections in Ultraviolet but it is not a New Novel, nor is it specifically a descendant, or in the tradition of the New Novel. Discovering that the work was somewhat dehumanized, the author was pleased to learn that Ortega y Gasset had spoken of dehumanization as a feature of modern art in general; realizing that form was of more interest to him than subject matter, he seized upon Susan Sontag's discussion of this aspect in today's fiction. But more than anything else a conscious effort was made to adhere to no tradition whatever, to create with complete freedom a work that would establish a valid norm for itself alone.

In discussing a work which was consciously created to side-step conventional categories of analysis, there arises a problem of approach. Categories, it seems, are useful when one tries to communicate in a specialized language that is characterized by them. Literary criticism has not yet developed any cogent method for speaking of literature without breaking it down first into genres and then into elements specific to each genre. Thus, we have the genre of the novel, an altogether misleading term which suggests to most people a particular kind of novel, that of the nineteenth century. The elements of fiction are commonly held to be plot, character, theme, style, etc., and these are even more difficult to get away from. There is still no way, apparently, to avoid discussing a novel, or even an anti-novel--if there is any such thing--without referring to the worn out categories of plot and character, form and content, and all the rest of the outmoded baggage that fiction is still expected to carry like a porter racing back and forth along the platform long after the train has departed, none the worse, it might be added, for having left him and his burden behind.

Plot

It might be remarked at this point that Ultraviolet, for all the anxious ranting of its author, is not a particularly extreme example of what is unfortunately still referred to as the avant-garde novel. In fact, it is far less radical, and therefore less demanding, than such works as, for example, the novels of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, or Barth. Indeed, it can scarcely be considered abstruse at all, and is surely not much of an advance (no advance at all, in fact) in terms of narrative technique. Its only claim is that it lies outside the mainstream of conventional fiction, though perhaps not very far outside, but that is not to say that it is a stellar example of what one critic calls post-contemporary fiction,³⁸ or that it looks to any particular future. Like an object in some New Novelist's universe, it simply is, for what it's worth, and posits nothing.

A conscious attempt was made, in composing Ultraviolet, to suppress or de-emphasize the plot. This does not mean that all rudiments of plot were eliminated. On the contrary, the story-line is quite well defined and omnipresent throughout. It was the author's intention, however, to disrupt the expectations of the reader, to distract attention from the main story, to exaggerate, sometimes

ironically, the interplay of ideas at the expense of narrative development. This decision doesn't particularly mean anything; it is the way of the book. Thus, after the chronological development of Part I, which no reader should find discomfiting, despite the fragmentary style and somewhat jerky rhythm, the story stops dead. All of Part II, a full quarter of the whole, takes place in one night and contributes nothing to the advancement of the plot. In a traditional novel, this kind of sudden arresting of forward motion would be considered a flaw; here it is a deliberately employed device that has as its purpose the subverting of the narrative flow. It reminds the reader that he is not to concern himself overly much with the unfolding of events, which are trivial in any case, but should concentrate on other aspects of the work that the author considers more important or more interesting. These are the aesthetic concerns, in a word, the form. The reader is invited to see the work as an object, to examine its architecture. He is ill-advised to become involved in the lives of the characters or the story they enact. It is a tool for creating distance, one of the major overall objectives of the work as a whole.

A second instance of subversion occurs at the beginning of Part IV. After the stasis of Part II, Part III continues in the mode of Part I, taking up the story and extending it forward for a duration of four months. Part IV then begins by jumping ahead another four months and

then retracing itself in an extended flashback. Again, the idea is to disrupt and create distance. Furthermore, the traditional structure of development, climax, denouement is eschewed as much as possible. The climactic event, the suicide of the heroine, is disposed of in a short paragraph; like all other events it is unimportant. There is no denouement; the last scene is brief and returns to the point where the section began; nothing is resolved. The form is neither linear, in the Aristotelian sense, nor geometrically symmetrical, as in, say, Henry James or Anatole France. It is non-Euclidean, organic, and yet well-defined. It may or may not be satisfactory but it is certainly legitimate.

Characters

Turning to the characterizations of the figures in the novel, the same principles apply. It will be noted that almost none of the characters could be called round, in Forster's sense. Only Herold, the main protagonist, and perhaps not even he, can be considered a fully developed character in the traditional sense. Once again, it was not the author's intention to make his people leap off the page into the lap of the reader, or to 'come alive' in any way. Still, it was implicit in the form of the novel that at least one character be well enough defined to create a discernible line from beginning to end.

The other characters, however, are not meant to represent "humors" or Dickensian types. They are more in the nature of objects. Part II consists of nine individually narrated chapters. Each chapter thus presents the consciousness of a single character, not so that he may define himself or round his edges for the reader, but merely so that he may be seen as an object in the way the New Novelists describe physical inanimate objects, for their "presence." Each character is a presence more than a person, and this, incidentally, reflects the protagonist's approach to life; that is, he wanders among presences and only reluctantly acknowledges the "personness" of anyone he encounters.

This, it might be observed, is not so abstract or artificial as it may sound. Characterization is not done away with completely; it is merely suppressed in the interest of more formal elements, and, once again, to prevent the reader from becoming sentimentally involved with fictitious personages, as he has been trained to do by his experience with traditional novels and traditional-minded critics who persist to this day in admiring fiction that pretends to realism, that seeks to convince the reader of the reality of fictitious people, and that, to the degree that it is successful in these aims, fails as art. This type of novel shares with pornography an

intention to involve, while the intention of art is to distance. The reader wants to believe in the story and characters, and the greater his belief in the veracity of the fiction, the further removed is he from exercising his aesthetic sensibility.

Technique and Distance

Among the techniques employed in this novel to create greater distance between the reader and the "substance" of what he is reading, two others are worthy of mention.

The first of these is that of fragmentation and collage. The novel is discontinuous. It is written in short paragraphs gathered into chapters, the whole being divided into four approximately equal parts. (It is possible to compare the quadripartite structure of the novel to the movements of a symphony, although no great effort was made to establish an exact correspondence. Thus, the first section, which moves fairly--relatively--quickly is an allegro, in which themes are announced and to some extent developed. The second section, the adagio, is slow and static; the third again moves along, andante; while the fourth, the finale, is both thematically and formally a recapitulation. Although he lays no great stress on this correspondence, the author did have it in mind at the time of composition.)

As the novel progresses, the individual chapters become more broken up, paralleling the mental state of the protagonist. Transitional elements are mostly absent, so that the overall effect is of montage or juxtaposition. This disconnectedness may at first be disconcerting, but it is easily adjusted to, and ultimately the reader should have no difficulty in following the story, if that is what he is interested in, and he is free to fill in the gaps as he chooses.

The other technique that should be discussed is probably more troublesome, and more likely to make the reader uncomfortable. This is the method used at times to transcribe dialogue, which can be described as third person or mediated direct speech. To pick an example at random:

She should lie down, get some rest.
He doesn't mind?
Why should he mind? (p. 238)

It is easy to discern, especially after some exposure, that this is meant to represent an actual conversation. (To translate: "You should lie down, get some rest." "You don't mind?" "Why should I mind?") The change of pronouns, however, suggests the intercession of another party, or of an additional party for each speaker, so that it is almost as if two people are talking about two other people talking. Almost, for the reader can hardly believe in these "ghosts." This is obviously a direct, if initially annoying, way of distancing the reader from

the scene, for he is forced to view it at an additional remove. It is as if the author is perversely resolved to preclude all involvement, to ensure that the reader never forgets that he is a spectator, that he is watching through a filter or medium. He is observing a mediated event, in the same way that Herold watches the dancer on TV in the last, eponymous chapter of the novel.

Point of View

Henry James created what is virtually a school of criticism devoted to analyzing fiction in terms of point of view. This has not proved to be a particularly fruitful approach to modern fiction that departs from the Jamesian ideology. Still, since these obsolete notions continue to occupy the minds of critics, a few words may be in order.

The point of view in this novel is ever shifting, although the most prevalent is that of the omniscient narrator (or implied narrator). Several chapters or individual short sections within chapters limit themselves to the point of view of a particular character. All the chapters in Part II are of this latter type, obviously. The author does not feel that the Jamesian regulation concerning consistency of point of view is in any way relevant or worthy of obedience. Moreover,

as with so much literary dogma, there is no reason to trouble refuting it since there was no real reason to assert it in the first place. Since there is no authoritative basis for any dogmatic principles to begin with, there is no need to make a fuss about ignoring them.

Conclusion

In the interest of brevity several other topics that are usually raised in discussions of fiction must be skipped. The question of theme, for example, will not be addressed. It is not a very interesting question anyway, and the kind of criticism that concerns itself with such matters as what a book is about, what the author is trying to say, what happens in the plot, etc., cannot be taken very seriously.

It is not the intention of this writer to formulate a coherent theory of fiction, nor is it his business. The above remarks were meant to clarify certain possible obscurities of intent and presentation and nothing more. The author believes, and he is far from alone in this, that any work of art is autonomous, and he is somewhat of a wistful atheist in the theological thickets of criticism.

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