EXPERIMENTS IN SHORT FICTION:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

If, in fiction, the writer is formally self-conscious of the traditional means which have engaged and shaped the reader's expectant attitude, he may choose an obtrusive form which intervenes between the author and reader. My short stories have this intention.

The Critical Introduction discusses this intention in relation to experimental contemporary American short fiction whose central concern is a radical problem of expression, an inability or refusal to work on the reader by means such as step-by-step plot, credible and concentrated characterisation, and language itself as a tool for organising and revealing meaning under the traditional directives of character and plot.

My own stories represent one among the many possible responses to this problem, which is finally a problem of the purpose, value, even possibility of transmitting an experience through fiction. They are shaped by this crisis, and attempt to alert readers to aspects of this crisis, the possibilities it generates.

RESUME

Si l'auteur a conscience de la méthode traditionnelle avec laquelle l'attitude du lecteur est engagée et est formée, il est possible qu'il choisît une forme qui s'impose, qui intervient entre l'auteur et le lecteur. J'ai cette intention dans les contes.

Dans l'introduction critique je discute cette intention par rapport au conte Américain expérimental et contemporain, qui se préoccupe du problème fondamental d'expression, qui ne peut pas ou ne veut pas manipuler le lecteur au tél moyen de structure graduelle, caractérisation croyable et concentrée, et le langage lui-même dans l'intention d'organiser et de révéler le sens conformément aux directives traditionnelles du caractère et de la structure.

Mes contes représentent un d'un grand nombre des réponses possibles à ce problème qui est finalement le problème de l'intention, de la valeur, même de la possibilité de transmettre l'expérience au moyen de la fiction. Ils se forment par cette crise et ils essaient alerter le lecteur aux traits de la crise, les possibilités qu'elle produit.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

This Introduction does not propose a definition of the short story; it will concentrate on formal problems and provide a perspective of certain developments within the contemporary American short story. The stories chosen for discussion vary widely, but what tends to underly them is an experiment with form, an experiment which concerns a radical problem of communication and suggests a critical self-consciousness in respect to certain aspects of a traditional organisation and identification of the short story.

In the short stories included in this thesis the development has been towards a formal satire which reflects ironically and corrosively on the construction of the narrative, thus attempting more to estrange than to draw the reader into the fiction. To discuss this development in critical terms, a Brechtian approach has been adopted. Brechtian but not with Brecht's conviction of the value of the results. For these stories, rather than emphasising a new direction, draw attention to some aspects of a crisis in the short story from which there may radiate many blind alleys.

A brief outline of Brecht's critical theory may indicate where I stand in relation to the authors to be discussed, and help me to point out some of the implications of such a theory for fiction.

In his critical writings on theatre, Brecht developed a theory of "epic" or "non-aristotelian" drama. This new form introduced what Brecht called "alienation" effects ("the alienation that is necessary to all understanding"). The "Theatre for Pleasure", which showed the world "as it is", was rejected in favour of what he felt to be a more dynamic and formally critical theatre, a "Theatre for Instruction". A principal alienation-device was that the actors should refrain "from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him." The terms Brecht used to characterise the typical relationship between spectator and play were "identification", "empathy", "hypnotic experience", "subjective attitude of becoming 'entangled' in what is going on", catharsis". [1]

Brecht's critical attention to the forms of acting and spectator-involvement attacked theatre at its roots. It thrust the same acid attention against any number of plays (often

valued for just those characteristics, felt to constitute the high experiential value of theatre, that Brecht condemned), irrespective of their widely ranging subject-matter. But what was at the heart of Brecht's innovations? His political convictions or a crisis in the development of drama? Theory answers a need, a discomfort which involves a problem of form. Brecht's theory was a response to the same problem that informed Pirandello's "Six Characters In Search Of An Author": the self-consciousness which made both reflect, though in different ways, on the 'reality' of the theatre, and on the stage itself as a separating and distorting factor in the communication.

We find in contemporary American short fiction that an estrangement of fictional expression has produced a variety of experiments with form. By 'estrangement of fictional expression', I mean something more than a re-structuring of form in response to the expression of new contents. The short story has grown through just this addition of new contents, and the addition has not in the past meant the radical breakdown of traditional form that I believe we now see in the contemporary American short story. What I do mean, and I think this helps to identify the new short fiction I am discussing, is an increasing concern with the very possibility of the author reaching out to, involving the reader through fictional means. The language he uses, the characters he

constructs, the plot he develops: such basic means are under fire, not only in terms of how best they might be employed, but more importantly in terms of questioning their validity and value, their ability to bridge the growing chasm between author and reader. Such questioning takes the form of disrupting and confusing these means, estranging them in the sense of detaching and emphasising them as a principal concern of the story which recoils on the very idea of a 'story' as a form of communication to which we have given a special value, a unique role.

In many cases, the corollary of a deliberate obtrusion of form between author and reader is a more urgent, more frantic expression, as if the author is shouting from behind bars. Expression is more impatient and direct, as if the author must seize the reader right at that moment; it tends to refuse the kind of plot characterised by a cumulative development which, like an invitation to wander through a house, opens this door, then another, with the challenge that the new glimpse, the fresh aspect poses the problem of organising the mesh of relations, and offers the prise of a final fusion of the related parts.

Fictional forms may vary widely in response to new emphases on, and doubts about, expression. At the lower end of the scale of experiment, a seemingly conventional form 'reveals' a

character at its inter-relating points of contact with other characters and its own self-appraisal, not as the achievement of its form, but as a function of a more urgent expression which nakedly thrusts through the accumulated mesh. An example of this, whose very title deliberately focusses a principal intention of traditional short fiction, is Flannery O' Connor's "Revelation". [2] More radical experimentation, such as we find in "In The Heart Of The Heart Of The Country" by W.H. Gass, dislocates point of view, estranges it so that the expression, instead of being manipulated according to, and in a sense secondary to, the step-by-step construction of plot, is driven upon itself, is at odds with itself. [3] The issue here is the very possibility of expression. In other experiments, fictional expression as a growth towards an ultimate point where all the relations established fuse like live wires, is exploded, for instance in Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" where the 'plot' persistently recoils upon itself, entangles its several relations so that the sparks jet, as it were, at the most incongruous points. [4] We find another kind of explosion (though the two authors have certain important features in common) in the short stories of Leonard Michaels where expression runs away with itself, achieves its ultimate range in the direct immediacy and

fantastic extension of the local detail which literally crackles with energy.[5] In Michaels' stories, expression is unleashed from the kind of fictional structuring that relies on its being withheld at each step for the purpose of establishing the conditions that will finally, and then most meaningfully, render it as an illumination of the whole inter-related structure.

We see, then, that a new kind of expression, a kind that draws attention to itself as expression, demands radical experiments with form. As with Brecht, the purpose is often an estrangement of the audience's conventional response, though this does not mean that such estrangement is the ultimate objective; rather that the estrangement is often enacted in order to be overcome in a new, more lively contact with the writing, a contact which, through the reader's confrontation with the author's formal problems, is a direct experience of the conditions of the expression.

Needless to say, the breakdown of traditional form involves a certain loss, a loss more keenly felt when the experiment unhappily forces a comparison with the demands and achievements of more conventional methods. Before I turn to more specific analyses of the stories mentioned above, I should draw attention to this shadow-side. For this purpose I will give a brief analysis of a relatively obscure, and far from successful,

short story entitled "The Son Of The Sad Fat Woodsman Goes North" by Ralph Dennis.[6]

The short story may be distinguished from the anecdote in that the sum of its parts, the form they receive, is an organic whole, whereas the manner of connection or inter-relatedness in the anecdote may be quite casual and unimportant or even non-existent as a method and organisation. We find in the above story anecdotal description of character: the character is introduced solely for its immediate impact, not as a set of suggestions that are developed through the structure of the story. Here is a 'description' of one such character, and note how the injunction "Think of" this character, betrays a self-consciousness, puts inverted commas around the construction.

> The Reverend Arthur Sandwich. Think of teeth the colour and texture of blue cheese. A nose the shape and hue of a dry gourd. A Phi Beta Kappa key worn purposely upside down as a tie clasp. A dog-eared copy of Fear And Trembling sticking out of his right suitcoat pocket. And a voice that rattled about in the dry gourd nose, the words like so many seeds, so that I, wanting to treasure every moment of the ceremony, heard none of it.[7]

This 'essence' of character given in a few images marks

an inability or refusal to explore and structure character. We find in this story a deliberate withering of character and of plot--that construction of the story by which it is made to yield intensely rendered meaning, and according to which each part grows out of the other. The story is given in diary-form, and here is a typical diary entry:

> 2/1/62
> The wedding night. Clarissa will not allow me to write about it. I can only say:
> 1. It was beautiful and holy.
> 2. She wore a "Vision of Venus" negligee designed by Lili St. Cyr of Hollywood. That it was sheer as a cloud and trimmed with lace.
> 3. That she does not believe in birth control.
> 4. That we drank one bottle of champagne.
> 5. That the object of marriage is to have children.

Note that an ironic humour characterizes the two quotations, particularly the latter where the chopped-up statement presentation is an over-reaction against the more serious and complex demands of plot in the realistic short story, and relieves its awareness of the distinction in flippancy. The humour of the "wedding night" scene is grounded in the comparison we make between this presentation and the more traditional kind

(by implication long-winded and superfluous?) which seeks to draw the reader into an experience, to transform the experience of the story's contents into an event, instead of confronting him with statement. The kind of statement the "wedding night" scene makes expresses an inability to express according to the assumptions past writers have made, the insights they have gained concerning their methods of reaching out to, and into the reader.

In the above story the formal means by which the experience is given to the reader are reduced to short-hand, shrivelled to the point where the experience refuses to take itself seriously. Such breakdown of form hinges on this point of communication, on reaching and convincing the reader of the truth and value of an experience through a fiction. Or if "truth and value" is now too presumptuous, then at least the aliveness and relevance of an experience transmitted through a form which justifies itself according to such criteria. The form of the story I have discussed does not justify itself, and is an example of negative breakdown. I will turn now to other short stories which, I believe, legitimise such breakdown by extending the range of the short story in new and relevant directions, thus alerting us to certain important problems at the heart of fictional expression.

In Flannery O' Conner's "Revelation" the farther reaches of expression are gained in opposition to the realistic framework, though it is by dramatic contrast with the ordinariness

and homeliness of the point of view that the expression achieves its expressionistic intensity. Here expression blazes on the outer edge of a realistic mode of fiction. In "The Heart of the Heart of the Country" by W.H. Gass, factual sub-titles which break the narrative flow, and a sort of tourist-report presentation, emphasise the frustration of the expression. The frustration produces an estranging form. When the emotion breaks through it is characteristically excessive and incongruous, flowing out of and back into the tourist-report presentation. The narrator's sense of his experience is not created through the multiple contact points of a conventional plot, but is given to direct, sometimes didactic, statement.

As in so much contemporary short fiction, emotion in this story haemorrhages; expression resorts to extreme and alienated measures which show its predicament. But finally the inability to communicate is felt to strike at the root of language, and an overturning of language, a paradoxical inversion of it, is then permissable, is indeed more expressive of his predicament, as when the narrator says: "My every word's inverted, or reversed—or I am. I hold you, too, that way. You were so utterly provisional, subject to my change. I could inflate your bosom with a kiss.... . enter your vagina from within . . ."[9] Here another character, the "girl", is not real in the sense of

having an independent objective existence, but is an aspect of him, of his problem, and is made up by words loosed from their meanings. Here the very raw material from which fiction is made is twisted out of its ground.

We find, then, in O'Connor's story, a direct expression which thrusts out of the realistic context, though it is still conditioned and to that extent contained by it; while in Gass's story a new and estranging form is required to convey the forms of estrangement within the story: estrangement from the reader, from the possibility of other characters, from words themselves.

The contemporary American short story shows a wide fragmentation of forms. This might be viewed as a response to the breakdown of Realism as the most effective form of communicating a sense and understanding of life in the actual world. I realise that this statement should not be left to stand alone, but it is not the intention of this Introduction to define Realism. What I may say is that Realism gave the short story a sharp, clear direction and a sense of relevance, a method of bringing into fiction an illusion of the actual world which writers did not have to consider as an illusion, and to achieve this as an ultimate aim.

Verisimilitude of detail, credibility and concentration of characterisation were its reflectors and its appeal. The realistic writer did not doubt that a plot should be calculated to reveal intensely the life of a character (and perhaps, through this, life itself); or that characters should be consistently presented (consistent with the logic of the character or the forces that act upon him), and adequately motivated. Such givens have since been questioned.

In some of the short stories by Leonard Michaels the narrative jumps off its tracks. One apparently minor detail, which in the realistic mode would be part of a controlled effort and developed in subordination to that effort, here develops an absurd life of its own, as in "Sticks and Stones", in which the narrator records:

> Afterwards, alone in my apartment, I had accidents. A glass slipped out of my hand one night, smashed on the floor and cut my shin. When I lifted my pants leg to see the cut, my other leg kicked it. I collapsed on the floor. My legs fought with kicks and scrapes till both lay bleeding, jerky, broken and jointless.[10]

The excess is precisely the feeling of exhultation in uncontrol. The freedom is exciting because it so

goes beyond the limits we have come to expect in fiction without realising them as limits; and because here language comes into its own, embraces itself. In the same story, we at one point find that what begins as an expression of sorrow, reverses itself, refuses to act on behalf of anything but itself, challenges the utility function of language: "I caught sight of her later as she sprinted into darkness. Groans issued from my mouth. They flew after her like a flock of bats."[11] Refreshing as this is, one wonders what can come of it, what has been lost in the interest of its freedom.

Robert Coover's "The Babysitter" directly and pointedly upsets narrative. Some of its features are close to those of my own stories—dislocation of time and confusion of point of view, which enable him to re-enact and re-invent parts of the plot in the very process of giving the plot. The story is like a crystal that changes with each turn. Coover forces attention to the fact that if a story is not held down to one particular development, it may continually break away from itself, re-consider itself, point out and even assume the other possibilities open to it.

The babysitter, for instance, having repeatedly been presented as the victim of a rape (in fantasy? in actuality?) turns to her rapists (now scared kids) and teases them, "You're both chicken."[12] The possibilities interweave, collide, return, contradict; and no author, no consistent point of view is there to mediate. As in Michaels' absurdities, the individual detail is allowed to bloom until it strangles the story: the detail, for instance, of the tight girdle, carefully woven into the plot, suddenly gloriously explodes: "The game of the night is Get Dolly Tucker Back in Her Girdle Again. They've got her down on her belly in the livingroom and the whole damn crowd is working on her . . ."[13]

The deliberate confusions of the story formally fragment characterisation; the events, by which we might usually experience character in the gradual intensification of a plot, run into one another, the one becoming an aspect of the other. The rape, for instance, melts into a game between the babysitter and the children, then is reconstituted into a different shape. The plot is there just sufficiently for one to understand the extent to which it has been broken up. What I find most interesting in the story is its ability to engage the reader, hold him, only to disorientate him, make him

start over from an entirely new beginning. It is not a story he reads, but a treatise on the story.

I have referred to Realism as the mode that in much experimental fiction is being challenged. But this argument must be sharpened. Is there one aspect in particular of the short story which has been challenged? For of course the realistic mode is not a rigid structure which cracks at the first blow; it is an elastic mode that has lent itself to widely differing approaches: from the omniscient narrator of Crane's "Maggie" to the dislocating first person of Conrad's "Youth" in which the accent of loss, of being torn from the romantic past and its identifications, is rendered by the narrative structure. What, then, is the essential characteristic of the short story which is now being challenged? A further analysis of "Youth" may clarify.

The recurrent break in the narrative structure of "Youth" at which, from the hypnotic past, Marlowe almost grotesquely surfaces in the present with his unnervingly automatic "Pass the bottle", expresses the quality of feeling that Conrad wants. This break is stressed against the perspective of the other breaks or disruptions that inhere in the remembered experience. While these latter are fused into a living wire by youth's magic, the wrench from then to now,

youth to age, is not thus transformed, and is indeed the increasingly charged point of the character's life. Here, I think, we find a principal characteristic of the short story, one distinguishing it from other forms: a life is pointedly experienced, the story comes together in a sharp flare, its point of maximum meaning and experience for the reader. This is not to say that the effect is simple. In Melville's "Bartleby", the 'tragedy' of Bartleby's life, swelling to a universal in the narrator's final cry, "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!", is subject to a complex point of view. The narrator's conclusion is not necessarily the author's. Even so, the aim is the illumination I have mentioned: in this case, it is the narrator who is unwittingly revealed as much as (or more than) Bartleby, and his very cry "Ah Bartleby! Ah Humanity!", pointedly reveals the kind of man he is, his assumptions.

This characteristic of the short story has been challenged in much contemporary American short fiction. Coover's "The Babysitter" intensifies character and plot only to scramble them. Where once prevailed a careful control, an employment of details in the interest of the final effect's charged rendering (a classic example

of this is James' "The Beast in the Jungle") , we may now see the anarchic explosion of details, in the short stories of Leonard Michaels; the direct, often incongruous and grotesque expression in "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" and in some short stories by Clark Blaise. In Blaise's "Extractions and Contractions", the event of a visit to the dentist (an event structurally isolated by the narrative) is the occasion for a grim surging reflection on life, which refuses a step-by-step, multi-contact method of plot, but like the "slick" he refers to suddenly accumulates: a thick garbage in the wandering, deadening avenues of the story.[14] The features of the story are an impatience and directness of expression, a juxtapositioning of separate and fully 'achieved' events; we appreciate such new accents more finely if we compare the story with a more conventional story by Blaise, "A Class of New Canadians".[15] This holds expression, holds its charge so that it flares in a highly expressive point at the end; the process is that of a fuse growing through a set of interlocking events. This kind of mediation by plot, which has so essentially identified the short story, is now being questioned.

Contemporary American short fiction is now, I think, in a period of self-consciousness. I do not mean that the short story necessarily reveals, as do my own, a direct self-consciousness that, as an essential part of the narrative, holds up a mirror to the formal method and its problems. Such self-consciousness is one form amongst the many others that may emerge from a period of radical formal experiment. Even within the kind of self-conscious form that mirrors the formal process, widely differing intentions are possible. My own intention, for instance, is to concentrate on the means by which a fictional communication is made, confusing, disrupting and exercising irony at the expense of those means so as to disengage the reader's involvement in the story. But if we consider some of the short stories by Joyce Carol Oates which have some formal devices similar to my own, we find just the opposite intention: an intensification of engagement.

In the story "Plot", for instance, the narrative is broken up: the 'I' as narrator, as subject, "invents" a plot which establishes himself as the object; he is detached from the narrative which is about himself, altering and erasing it at will. This device, whereby

the narrative enacts a consciousness of itself, seems further assisted by the sudden and estranging invective against the "reader": "My brain is going, but before it goes completely I want to make very clear my dislike for you: my readers, who are reading through my life as fast as possible, skimming along, impatient with me and hoping for some final mess."[16] And yet, finally, such formal reflections on the construction and reading of fiction are revealed as the method by which we are given a dramatic, psychological depiction of character. When the narrator says, "erase everything", we are meant to take this as an indication of the psychological state that will lead him literally to "erase" his life, by igniting himself. The diatribe against the reader does not compel him to examine his formal relation to the fiction, but instead confronts him with a psychological content. The experiments in this story, then, are a function of theme and the reader's experience of the theme from the inside.

"Plot" brings into focus the problem of communication that I have mentioned. The fragmentation of the parts that combine in the fiction-process is a formal structuring of this problem, a construction of barriers. In my own stories, barriers are constructed by way of a satirical approach to some of the means--credible and

concentrated characterisation, for instance, the setting up of scenes, the very language one uses to trap meaning— which have constituted the short story. It is not surprising, though it may finally prove a barren achievement, that these stories should turn more and more against themselves; for the inability, or refusal, to achieve a project on a firm, meaningful base, the inability finally to express, means a turning inward, a repeated self-inflicted wound.

NOTES

[1] Bertholt Brecht, "Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction", "The German Drama: Pre-Hitler", "Alienation effects in Chinese acting", Brecht on Theatre, trans. by John Willett, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), pp. 71, 78, 93, 98.

[2] Flannery O' Connor, "Revelation", in Stories From the Sixties , ed. Stanley Elkin, (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

[3] William H. Gass, "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country", in Stories From the Sixties.

[4] Robert Coover, "The Babysitter", in Stories From the Sixties.

[5] Leonard Michaels, "City Boy" and "Sticks and Stones", in Going Places, (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). Only "Sticks and Stones" is specifically analysed, later in the text (pp. 12-13).

[6] Ralph Dennis, "The Son of the Sad Fat Wordsman Goes North", in Short Stories from the Literary Magazines , eds. Jarvis Thurston and Curt Johnson, (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970).

[7] Ibid, p. 59.

[8] Ibid, p. 61.

[9] William H. Gass, "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country", p. 96.

[10] Leonard Michaels, "Sticks and Stones", p. 52.

[11] Ibid, p. 59.

[12] Robert Coover, "The Babysitter", p. p. 270.

[13] Ibid, p. 269.

NOTES (Continued)

[14] Clark Blaise, "Extractions and Contractions", from A North American Education , (Toronto: Doubleday, 1973).

[15] Clark Blaise, "A Class of New Canadians", from A North American Education.

[16] Joyce Carol Oates, "Plot", from Marriages and Infidelities , (New York: Vanguard Press, 1972), p. 209.

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Pirandello, L. "Six Characters in Search of an Author", in Naked Masks: Five Plays , ed. Eric Bentley. Toronto: Clark Irwin & Co., 1974.

A PIERCING LIGHT

1 The Living Sea

It depends on the light in the sky. Under the blue sky of a summer day the obese hills of green grass whose blade-tips are also whitish as if brushed with flour, drop to the shining cliffs, cliffs that fall to the sea and yet, on such a day, bear a sudden resemblance to strong white teeth like an animal's. Then the sea is a gelid blue such as one sees in picture postcards displayed along the promenade, and whitening, frosting over as the eye pursues it to a lacquered dazzle where the sun squats on the water like a chicken. The sun is a needle, the sea spread out like a tatooist's patient (the demand is great for this service on the coast) whose body, in a fixated yet ever broken pattern, the white and red sailing boats paint.

But when the wind from the sea blows its brawny, bruising clouds over the sun, a shadow bulges in the bay like a trawling net and the block of blackening water edges hugely against the whitewashed glow of the cliffs. Then the cliffs

seem to shrink like the palm of a shutting hand, and grey, and the sea sucks like a canvas against them, flicking furious tongues under the cliffs that hiss.

And if a storm threatens and the sky before it is blacked out flings a luminous light on the unbroken calm, then the sea is like a mighty fist whose bloodless knuckles swell in ridges. The cliffs cower like animals or children, and rear back like a chained thing when the storm hits. When lightning burns in the black sky, the sea bulges, a livid body, and plunges into its moaning night.

But storms do not occur very often on this coast.

Sometimes the coast is shrouded in a thick fleshy mist like pastis when water is added. The solid cliffs flow into the sea, the sun is a jaundiced smudge in the enclosing vapour. The sea is white, like whitewash, but underneath it, apart from it as it seems, one hears the suck and mastication of the surf in the wall of stones.

But again, such mists do not often occur.

On a typical day the sea is an uncertain colour, as if reflecting its uncertainty. The cliffs are greyish, or dirty, and are like the old men that hump on benches

when the sun is out. The green discoloured hills straggle to the finish of the land, and the clouds blow like damp sheets in the sky.

One must choose one's time carefully if one would take a pleasant walk along the cliffs. But the weather is changeable, and it is difficult to arrange.

At a certain time of the day one might behold a lonely figure on the cliff-edge. His unnatural quiet as if gripped there like a hook, might cause the watcher to pause. But is this latter should exist, it is probable—since he is only human—that his interest would lapse into boredom, for nothing would happen and one cannot observe nothing for long without becoming restless. But should he remain a little longer, he might be surprised to see this figure disappear. The immediate apprehension might surprise and perhaps concern, despite the almost simultaneous realisation that the figure had merely dipped behind the cliff to the winding path that descends to the beach. It is possible that the watcher, having a little time to spare, would approach the cliff-edge, would pursue. Unlikely, but let us give caution to the wind. Let us suppose it.

What would the pursuer see? A blur, the back of the pursued's head? Should he rush up seising him by the shoulder—a most unlikely occurrence—would he be confronted by such sorrow as to force him back, as if touched by a leper, and flee to the safety of his life? But he tires; he sees, far down the twisting path, a figure tending—as so many do—towards the beach. He is afflicted by the absurdity of his pursuit: what had possessed him that he should pursue nothing? He is wasting time, he turns back, there are things to be done, had he forgotten? He remembers an appointment: the doctor, his heart is bad, he must pick up his wife, he must collect the children from school. He hurries back along the cliff path, thorns drag at his legs, his heart thuds in his mouth, his mouth is dry and unpleasant, tasting of licorice. He is undoing the good work which his removal to the coast has built into his life.

Marcus Blake had been walking quickly, glancing behind him, though ofcourse he was quite alone. He walked more slowly now, kicking idly at the ferns that

clutched like green hands in the sandy path. It was sunny and still, the air crackling faintly with the sounds of insects. He watched his feet lift and fall, carelessly crushing the green ferns that sprang back as if alive. A sharp root caught at his ankle, he pulled against it . . . He knew this path intimately, knew it with the unquestioned knowledge one has of one's wife; with the unquestioned knowledge one has who returns again and again to the same place, until gently it sinks into mute identification with the visitant. He knew that soon he would fork right, disclosing the sudden theatre of sea and sky, where the rock rode bare and high, where the rock burst through the soft earth, the resisting ferns, like the emaciated frame of one brought down by a cancer.

Though he had come to live on this living coast three years before, because he had supposed that he would love it, Marcus Blake's life was not happy.

He worked for the Advertising section of the — Publishing House; it was the best, he had sighed, that a vaguely literary man might expect in a society crassly indifferent

to the aspirations driven in like shining nails by a liberal arts education. 'Burning with enthusiasm' on leaving the University (with a mediocre degree) , Marcus Blake had tried a writing career. But it was not good for his health, as he indeed was the first to acknowledge, not without a touch of pride. It became his habit to rush off, sometimes not only in mind but in body, his large head wobbling between his hands, in pursuit of the written idea. Each moment of his life flamed but once; he would press the flame into print as one presses flowers in a book. It occurred to him that his life was a threat and a betrayal to the extent that he had not written it; that it had been written for him in a hand not his own, unintelligible or indifferent.

He grew thin. His blue fleshy eyes protruded. The joints in his bony fingers swelled shapelessly; his nails were raw with biting. But nothing happened.

He disdained regular meals. Sometimes the very thought of putting food into his mouth, mashing it in the soft obscene hole that was his mouth, nauseated him. It was nonetheless true that every so often his body, craving

substantial food, ate livers, kidneys, hearts. He wiped a furtive hand across his stained mouth. It may have been that this irregular diet affected his writing.

His Muse was a hag who drew him to her bloody breasts. But certainly his minor agonising flashes of inspiration failed to light up the visceral prose that clotted like black blood on the otherwise blank paper. It was, to put it charitably, an excessive prose, trying too hard for meaning.

He was not without insight. He saw what was wrong in the lives of his friends: the living moment was denied, it consumed its own excrement, it . . . His heart pounded unnaturally. It was, he so well understood, as if an author had written the parts they were to play in life, and they were bound to follow, and perhaps the author had long since become bored with them, had thrown them up. Marcus Blake was at times persuaded to believe that the text was his own. It was against this most subtle of snares—so subtle because so generally embraced—that he would have to guard himself.

Where then had he gone wrong? He crouched on his

stone perch and the book he had hooked under an arm, a well-thumbed copy of Pirandello's play "Six Characters in Search of an Author", dropped from his slack fingers. He looked out over the separate blues.

Ah he knew. He knew. He would never write. With a long delicate sigh he tried to accept it. He hiccouphed. What was the use? He looked out. The Sea. What was its legend? The living Sea. He started to rise. His huge shadow pinned like a dark bird to the white bone of the rock, and what looked like a crimson rag started from its ebony beak. Wheeling, a white desert blackened under its flight. The sun, a red prow, cleaved a gushing wake towards him, and the wake was a sea of birds that writhed in the bloody corkscrews of their dying. No, it was no use. He peeled his shadow off the stone like rotten paper and sat down, scratching the back of his hand. "We are all", he murmured, "creatures of myth and mystery. And my desire unwrites histories."

And yet his heart beat painfully. He averted his eyes. Nothing moved. Things without shadow. Numb. His body did not sense the rock. Somewhere the harsh choked cry of a gull. But no gull was there. No monstrous thing

of flesh. He tried to rise, he could not feel himself any longer. He wanted to grip this life, this living bodied sea that was nothing—no no! that was his scourge, lifting its thongs against his red blood . . .

He stood on the white rock, raising his gripped hands to the gentle bay in an ambiguous gesture. Far below him, far down on the beach, the two people, like tiny porcelain figurines, previously engaged in the act of love, now looked up. The woman, gasping, had pointed.

The Sea. Oh the life that grew like a trunk in his wrists!

The Sea's monotony. Ah, the life deprived of his invenation of it!

The Sea! The zippered lightning off the dark swell. The monstrous maned golden head of the sea at dawn. The last raked fall leaves of the sea at evening.

Like claws his feet gripped the stone eyrie in the sky, his body roped to a kind of ecstasy, his clutching hands rushing up . . .

The two lovers had risen dripping from the sea and sand clung to their limbs as each moved into the body

of the other. When they observed the young man in the cliff-face, they stopped what they had been doing and gazed up at him, shielding their eyes against the sun. They were fortuitously situated so that, while they could see him, he could not see them.

They watched him.

Gradually his emotion left him; consciousness returned. Gulls wove arabesques about his head, but a faint smile brushed his lips.

He turned as if to go. He had had quite enough fresh air for one day, his lungs were raw. He glanced at his watch. There was still the shopping to do, the dinner to make. Soon his wife would return from work.

He looked out to sea irresolutely. The same faint smile tugged at his lips. A knowing smile. One might even say an insufferably smug smile. The mild bay caught his eye. He lifted a fist and smote the crumbling rock that had been his pedestal. Then he went back.

The two lovers returned with a smiling shrug to their love-making. The late afternoon sun was warm on their hurling thighs.

Marcus Blake walked slowly back along the

cliff path. The smile that had lit up his face had smudged. The feeling was alive in him that at the last moment he had been cheated.

2 Affairs of the Heart

His first thought on waking was the futility of all human endeavour. His second was that his present state of mind refused to admit the subtle, the necessary distinctions of which he was only too aware. Distinctions that isolated his present mood from the mood that would—oh inevitably—supplant it as a result of splashing a lot of very cold water over his face—a sensation which he now anticipated with an ambiguous pleasure owing to a suspicion that, while his being might flame under the tap, it might equally well be made to feel dull and heavy, enormously physical, as a consequence of the tiny probing fingers of water.

Distinctions moreover that isolated him from his

fellow man who, like the unwitty fellow he invariably was, would confront his rash judgement with busy contempt, and with better reason—Marcus ruefully reflected—than he, Marcus, had for making it.

These judicious distinctions were sharp in his mind as he felt obliged to take note of the room in which he lazily stretched his body, swathed in morning sunlight. He noted the drab curtains pulled askew in the clouded window. He noted the clothes at the base of the bed. Cast-off, unliving things. He noted his wife's body which lay bunched up at his side, her face buried in the pillow and invisible but for a thin strip which started at the exposed neck and terminated in a wedge of brown curls at the head.

The sharpness of these things offended his eyes, as though were he to touch one of them he would cut his hand. It would bleed over the white sheets.

But if he remained perfectly still he knew that their judgement of him was suspended.

Marcus Blake looked at his wife's body.

He looked at his own, which humped under the sheet like a cocoon. Under the sheet it was warm and sticky. It was comfortable.

Yet he felt appalled at the thought of change, when it would come at him with its demands. He pulled the sheet to his mouth. As his wife awoke in the light, she found him staring at her. She smiled. "What time is it?"

Instead of answering, Marcus Blake said enigmatically, "In silence doth the tiger leap."

They had been married three years before. They had studied at the same University and had met in the final year, and married at the end of the final year. They had been amused to reflect that before they had met they had seen one another many times and meant nothing to one another. Then they had met and meant something to one another, but what it was Marcus had been unable to decide.

At certain times it seemed to him that their intimacy had met every condition of an intimate

relationship, but that this intimacy was something between them, a mutual goal which both hoped to attain, as it were, outside their real feelings. As if they were playing a game and the intimacy functioned as a score board.

They slept in the same bed, ate the same meals, lived in the same house. But sometimes Marcus Blake wondered why the house was there at all.

He loved his wife dearly. She was attractive, intelligent, interesting. Sometimes he forgot her, and sometimes he had the oddest feeling that he didn't know what to do with her. What was the next move in the game.

When they returned from work, they told each other everything that had made their day a day. One of the girls in her class reminded her so much of herself as a young girl. His wife prattled deliciously.

The headmaster, a gaunt man from Birmingham (which unclean city he seemed to carry with him still in his hollow smile and dirty fingernails)—the headmaster had sat in for one of her classes ("picking his nails all the time", Marcus was told), and the children had been hushed and serious and she herself nervous. But she

believed that he had been impressed.

She was very witty about some of the teachers. They were all 'characters', and his wife came home with many stories. "You know that character in that Graham Greene novel", she would begin, "well . . ."

Occasionally they went to the cinema. Recently they had seen Bergman's "Scenes from a Marriage", and had enjoyed a fruitful discussion of the film over a very good dinner.

She was a detective story addict. She loved trying to discover all the clues, and coming up with the triumphant logic.

At this time, when they had been married three years, Marcus Blake was secretly meeting another woman.

"Marcus, I've been thinking about the summer vacation."

"Yes . . .?"

"Well, what would you say to Spain this year?"

"Yes."

"Or Italy. We've always dreamed of going to Venice. The City of Labyrinths."

"Yes."

"Well say something!"

Marcus stared at her across the breakfast things. The table was full. One could not have put more on to that table. The honey crawled from the lip of the honey pot. The butter was yellow gold, melting in the butterdish. The table-cloth was stained.

He stared at his wife across these things. At the expression of her face which had flowed out of interested inquiry into an unequivocal mold of annoyance. With a flutter in his stomach of excitement and fear, Marcus speculated on the consequence of silence.

The space between them screwed itself into the wizened face of a Dickensian character, or a discarded manuscript.

Indeed, absurd as this may seem to you, it was as if their life together, a life made up ('made up': the possibility of a pun teased his mind)—of oh how many shared things; a life which above all was an affair of living day against day, mind against mind, flesh against

flesh--not to omit its being also an affair of the heart--that this wonderful terrifying life now hung in the balance.

And it was this sense he had, this sense of something other than the mere--the word squeezed out of his brain like a pip from the lemon--conflict of personalities, that made him consider his cruelty irrelevant, his response alien and impersonal. He saw his wife over a great distance.

He let out an involuntary belch. "We've never been to Venice."

His reflections turned, with a sort of shrug, to a novella by Henry James, set in the City of the Waters, which he had been recently reading. Ah James. His great love. What a master of the subtle art of cruelty.

The bay like a huge mirror was tilted up to the sky. The vacancies of the sky blossomed from the piercing silver needle of a plane. They were alone.

The path they followed was faintly impressed on the jewel-like flamings of the ferns, and because of its

serpentine twistings it was hidden from their eyes beyond a short section of its course, which section was approximately duplicated at each twist. The fuzzy noise of insects seemed only to accent the silence that welled up like a deep sea from the slight scuffle of their shoes.

Had it not been for the raw sun that burned into his neck and which caused him a little irritation, Marcus Blake would have given himself to a sort of swimming sensation.

The girl was bare to the waist about which she had coiled a blue blouse. The blue transparent stuff moved with her moving thighs.

Her back rose a livid scar from the blue sheath of the blouse, but her shoulders were freckled. Once as she had turned to him with a smile he had noticed, it seemed for the first time, the delicate undergrowth of veins, like the fine brush strokes of an old Japanese watercolour, or like an exquisitely expanding bruise, under the filmy skin. His penis swelled.

He did not compare her with his wife. He did not consider that he was doing his wife an injustice. For the

moment it was as if his wife belonged to a previous chapter, and like any author he was concerned only with what was immediately at hand.

He gave himself gladly to the suspending medium of their walk along the cliff path, upon the living hands of ferns, under the hot sun.

That night in bed, Mr and Mrs Blake finished their cups of tea, switched off the bedside lamp, and made hungry love even before the burning bulb had died to a blue skull. It was not perhaps a sadistic love, though she bit into his skin, and it was achieved to the accompaniment of "Tristan and Isolde". It was not a sadistic love, perhaps because the sadistic acts were not desired in themselves but as an obscure means to something else that neither could identify yet longed for.

Indeed it was as if each further penetration famished this hunger. Into her white laid-out thighs Marcus Blake pressed his fingers until blue bruises sprouted from their tips. She drew him into her until she shrieked. But it was a cry of unsatisfied longing.

He grew tired. He grew tired. He understood he had vastly miscalculated his orgasm. The desire shrivelled in his body. His wife, he saw with revulsion, was attached to him.

When it was over she cried into the sheets, and he did not want to comfort her.

It was not a pretty scene, and certainly not a laughing matter, but Marcus Blake maliciously giggled under the blanket like a child reading a comic by torch-light.

Penelope Blake was an unusually intelligent young woman. She had married her husband, not without some misgivings, because there had been something about him, for all his strange passiveness, that had set him above the others. A vague longing, a fierce longing. It was the difference. It was not a dream. It existed, somewhere, in their actual lives.

Sometimes, when they touched it, it had sent a hot shiver through her. As if she had also touched the strangeness

between them.

She was not a woman who would rest content with vague intuitions. Her mind was clear and articulate. If their life was special, it had to be special, it had to be more than an intimation.

Sometimes, at night, as he slept she touched his face, and it was cold and strange to her.

If she had misgivings, it was not because she doubted her will or ability to realise this thing. It was because of the strange passiveness of her husband, an attitude that came upon him like a sleep even as he was aflame with his longing.

Penelope Femin, for that was her maiden name, had known many men before Marcus. But Marcus was different.

Yes, he was different. He had—she could put it no other way—a radical sense of life, as if he feared that it might be compromised at any moment. He was not selfish, not enamoured of himself, as the others had been. Not because his very self seemed an oppression to him at times, and would await, pale and crumpled in his chair, the injection of her life.

And what was so special about their life? It was that each had pierced the other's deeper being. Pierced but could not hold, not yet.

He had excited her. He still excited her. But lately, when she tried to make something of this excitement, when her hands itched to mould it, shape it according to her desire, he had, as it were, perversely shut off the current; the wheeling clay had slumped and stuck to her fingers like slime. But why? Was it his job? Why was he no longer willing, or able, to let all fall away that they might again lift their eyes to the life that rained down like a fire from the sky? She loved him, but she was beginning to wonder if he was not after all a little weak.

She looked out to sea, and there were tears in her eyes. The sea like a huge ball bounced gently in its crater. She had loved the sea, but now it tormented her.

The previous night Marcus had done something to her that was not permissible, and beyond which there was nothing. The following day she had left him.

Marcus Blake watched the sea from his rock. The torn clouds wheeled a shadow like a living thing through the water. The sea smashed on the rocks. His eye was caught by the dark gob of sea-weed. Treacherous. It breathed against the swimmer's body, brushed against his tearing fingers. Marcus shuddered. He saw himself on the shore, his nipples erect in his body stiff with salt. He dived a flash of light into the clear water, but to find himself caught in the weed, the weed stroking his face, drifting into his open mouth . . .

He would have to confront his wife. But what was there to say? His revulsion had afflicted him as an overwhelming physical fact. Until then, though he had met the other woman, he had never doubted that in some way he loved her. Had some terrible thing underlain that love, some monster of the unconscious, and now risen up against them? But somehow, these terms by which he tried to understand it, did not seem right.

He did not consider that he had been in any way

to blame, that this thing might have been averted. It rose up against him as an overwhelming physical fact, something one did not think to question.

He walked slowly back. The future did not exist for him. Yet had he been questioned, he might have intimated that in a strange way he enjoyed the deep lethargy that had come upon him like a benediction.

When he entered the house, he did not see his wife, but instead he saw Sarah Manley. Her chestnut-brown hair floated over her shoulders. She was stirring something in a red pan. The big wooden spoon sucked in what looked like stew. The white shocking line of her neck showed under her bent head. He was reminded of the Grimms' story, "Hansel and Gretl".

She did not turn immediately, but her head rose like a bird from behind the red pan. Marcus glimpsed dark tufts of hair that thrust out from her armpits.

Then she turned towards him.

Sarah Manley was a shrewd if not very intelligent woman. She knew what she wanted, and usually got it. She had wanted Marcus Blake for some time. Now she had him.

She had not liked his wife, not because she was his wife, but because she, Sarah, and his wife were so very different. Had she been closely questioned about this, she would have twitched her little shoulders and smiled significantly, but she could not have easily put into words this difference which she had intuited so very exactly, so very, one might say, femininely. But she might have suggested more im murmuring huskily that Mrs Blake was a bit strong about 'women's lib', that she had "funny ideas" and went to political meetings.

No, she was not an intelligent woman, but she believed with all her heart that life was a good deal fatter--she herself was a little plump--than the stereotypes imposed on it. She had dealt with Penelope Blake fairly and it was that lady's fault if she saw things in black and white. She did not at all believe that she

herself was 'unawakened woman'. If her interests were superficial, she at least had a lot of fun. She took life as it came. "Some people" never had any fun and didn't want you to have it either. She had read Sartre, reluctantly under Marcus' prompting, and while she had not entirely comprehended his "Being and Nothingness", she had intuited his point about man's crime against man, as if—so she told Marcus one day, immensely surprising him—as if people liked to "write up" other people, cutting at will, and even rejecting utterly the complex and living character that each man is.

She wanted to live. The blood in her veins sang for life. Life was there for the taking and she took. With both hands.

As she looked out to sea, Sarah Manley felt it as a big thrust of life inside her. All of her fourteen years tingled inside her mubile body.

Evening.

Clouds like dark horses raced across the sky. The sun a red tumour in the West. The tide painted red and gold. A lonely boat appearing in the red and gold sea.

The sun climbed the kerosene-coloured sky. The sky shimmered like a snowfield. The sea frisked like lambs. A wind picked up in the pines that clambered down to the sea like a great bear. The bear appeared to scratch its head, perplexed.

Marcus Blake, from his stone observatory, had witnessed the passing of the sun. An observer might have seen him for a moment and thought nothing of it. But had he remained a little longer he would have speculated that

—Here was a young man who did not know what he wanted from life.

His heart might have gone out to the world.

He might have sensed in this great drama of nature something pleasurably different from the late-night show;

and shivered and returned, fearful of the cliff path at night, leaving the world to Marcus Blake.

He might—and this is surely more probable—have not known what to think, not known that there WAS anything to think. At any rate this is all speculation.

Then let us softly retire.

. . . . .

3 The City of the Dead

Marcus Blake lived in the city, was immersed in the city. The city was huge. From its highest points one could not penetrate its smoking skies to the fields beyond. Its buildings of stone and glass rose up like an army. He liked this. The city was man's last home.

Sometimes he remembered the coast, but the memory faded. The city enclosed him like his own flesh. He had lived alone in the city for three years. He did not think of leaving.

It was built before his eyes. Stone thrust up into the sky where it glinted. He had seen progress leave its black prints in a green park, blast the black shell of a church. He liked this. Life was torn down, and stone memorials raised to it. He watched. What else was there to do?

He worked as a builder. His mates were rough Irishmen, they spat in their hands, the exposed flesh of their faces reddening from exertion, cracking like rainless mud.

Marcus Blake had lived in the city for three years and in the city he would stay. At night as he lay on his bed he watched the city flame to the sky. He watched the sun die, and witnessed the coming of the opaque starless night, that squatted like some huge animal on the fluorescent streets. He was never bored. The vast engine of the city throbbed without end. He fell asleep with its noise in his head.

Sometimes he remembered the coast and the sea, the steep rise of the sea like a huge blue hill in the air . . .

Penelope Blake had stayed with her mother. She had not known what to do. She immersed herself in work. She tried not to remember the coast. But when she did she wondered what had gone wrong. Less and less. Surely they had been happy . . . She left home to become a political activist.

Sarah Manley was momentarily distressed when their relationship fell apart. But she had not been to blame. Whatever had she seen in him? She shuddered to recall his clammy body on top of hers. Like a dead thing. She eventually accepted, for she was an adventurous girl, an offer of a job as a Gogo dancer somewhere in the Caribbean.

In the city the cold froze animate life. Smoke poured in thick white sheets like cheese-cloth from the high buildings. Marcus Blake trod rutted ice. He was late for work. The night before he had dreamed of the coast, which had risen up shining, its cliffs white hands of supplication. The dream had made him late. The dream had

been a revelation. He was at the base of the cliff and was trying to climb it, but when his feet found a root it broke off, rotten, and the crevices in the rock face for which his fingers grappled, spurted glass. But now he was high up the wall and the sea smashed far below him, and what he was climbing was no longer a cliff face but a kind of white honeycomb out of which a bee emerged huge with gold and black fur. He muttered, "The lion springs in darkness", when the warm enveloping body of the bee was suddenly clamped to him, his face was buried in it, and with a shrill sucking sound it withered him. "It must be the effect of the sun on the cliff", he thought. Then he awoke.

The snow blasted against his face but he did not feel it. He had arisen from the dream frightened. Lost. The snow like a huge porcupine blew its white quills, but he did not feel them. He hurried. Shadowy beings slipped behind the sheeting snow. He hurried across a junction. Engines rose against him. A car bore down.

What the hell! Blurred against the windscreen, he had witnessed a white face in dark glasses. Now he was locked in the centre of the road. Traffic smashed on either side of him. He felt he was the victim of an

inexplicable game. He saw a girl disappear into a shop. Somehow he had to reach her.

Fur-fleeced men and women stared. Their faces white masks, their eyes a soft secret bruised skin.

He saw the girl twine a pair of blue nylons about her long fingers. She resisted him. She did not like his appearance. The skin of his head was sterile. But his eyes moved her with their pain and longing. She was not an insensitive girl, not unadventurous. While she frankly recognised that he was trying to pick her up, she realised that in a deeper sense he was not. Intrigued, she agreed to a coffee.

Marcus Blake helped her to understand that life was a blighted thing unless one gripped it in one's hands.

He did not return to work. He walked past the building site. The sweating concrete heaved like a stone vomit in the air. With pain he heard the piercing cry of an electric drill.

She told him that she studied music at the Academy, and would soon be taking her final examination, and then . . . He told her that his favourite opera was "Tristan und Isolde". Her face lit up. They breathed together the warm passion. But she had been unpleasantly surprised. She found Wagner's opera excessive.

They lived together. They were poor. The examination results were a disappointment. Marcus collected unemployment insurance. Their rooms were cold and damp. She developed a hacking cough.

They sat in the cold, ill-furnished apartment, and the city thudded like a grimy seaswell against the window. They had been quarreling. Marcus had again done nothing. The dirty dishes choked up the sink.

She bent down to put on a record. She sighed. The same tunes over and over again.

"What are you putting on?"

"Nothing."

She selected "La Boheme" by Puccini. The torn cover pictured an artist with dark snakes of hair and a brown frock coat, contemplating his hidden canvas; behind

him the sky was on fire with velvet flames. The imperfections of the record were very distinct.

"What is there in life?" he wondered. "one tries, one really tries to make something of life. But nothing happens. If only it were like fiction." He considered for a moment, then added as an afterthought, "Preferably old-fashioned fiction."

"As for me", she mused bitterly, "I don't know what I'm doing here. Where do I come in? I thought it was to be the biggest affair of my life. And look at it. He hasn't even asked me my name." She screwed up her face indignantly. Well I know one thing. I'll be out of it before long."

But they were hearing a beautiful aria. Mimi enters. She asks for a candle. They sob.

"What is that?" he asks.

"Che gelida manina."

"?"

"Your tiny hand is frozen, let me warm it."

Marcus turns to her,"What is there left to us but a moment's beautiful blindness?"

They embrace. Mimi's voice is like the spring that pierces the dead earth. For the moment it is as if life is suspended, held off. And it is the last moment they will have together before the separation.

. . . . .

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IMAGES

Recently I have read a novel by Dickens. But do not ask me which novel. Most of it has left me--yes, for all his vivacious surfaces, his forcing of the novel like a corrupt fruit in the hothouse of the city, forcing it from the energy that pours like a crowd through the gargantuan glass dome of the city. Ah, but most of it has left me, left me as the blazing maned horses of the fairground, cooling to painted iron, leave the boy who slouches home through deserting streets with holes for his trouser pockets and the bitter detritus of sucked candyfloss in his mouth.

But I had been about to say that one image still haunts me. One image, though perhaps you'll think me sentimental in this, moved me deeply enough to remember. Two orphans crouch in the glow of a hearth. The image is fire.

They huddle. Her face falls. His arm draws across her frail shoulders. But the point is, they gaze with a single calm vision into the fire, and beyond there is only darkness.

Recently I have read a novel by Dickens. But do not ask me which novel. Most of it has left me--his monstrous prose

like a fat blister in a badly-fitted shoe. But one image has pierced me like another flesh. A young girl, bright as summer corn, ephemeral as a chrysalis but for the dark rings stamped like pads of cattle dung about her eyes, and an old man wasted like a cancer, sleep in the red shadow of a factory furnace. The image is fire. A young man, ageless and smoke-blackened, crouches by the furnace. His soul, we are to understand, has been eaten by fire.

I, too, have found in fire man's image. As like an acne it pits, as like bright tigers it springs, as like the flesh of a fierce Christ it razes, so man, so man . . . But let us have done with images.

This city is a city of fact.

Cracking as it plunges up, forcing up into a contracted sky choked with dead birds its other temples, encrusting the green land with a flesh, a filth, a foul glut of stone . . .

But the city is a city of fact. Facts may only be replaced by more facts. They do not illumine, blaze as at night the buildings blaze. A fact may not become its other,

whatever that other may be.

And yet it is my experience, when so it pleases me, to discover in the city that stone is not invariably stone, but glass, a glass communicating an image of the city at once wavering and fixed.

But I find that the impression of which I speak is merely an image whose essence I might disclose by means of more imagery, as if like a hill of blazing dust in that darker sky I should . . . I believe I had intended to say that one appears to dream the city, dream its stone and steel to ribbons of air. And it is wonderful how easily one slips into such expression. But perhaps you are thinking, "These are only images I use to distract attention from the precise meaning, the stone reality that fails me."

But since this is my narrative, I should reply, "I do not want your attention. It is precisely what I do not want."

If I were to track this image of glass to its root--but that is impossible. Or undesirable. If then I were to account for this image in the experience it is meant to anticipate, or

pre-arrange, I would have difficulty. There is something to consider in this. Consider then that the morning of the particular walk I intend to describe was a dry, blustering morning, the streets I walked were bleached and cracked: my image of the glass has no basis in fact here, which basis would arguably exist had the streets been wet, as in fact they now are wet where the traffic outside my mean tenement window repeats a crisp rasp like tearing paper, or the crackle of fall leaves, in the flowing luminous dark. However, behind an image there is always a fact. Let me then suggest that the blasting wind which came in gusts like elephants from across the dark cold cruel river made my eyes water: thus the wavering image of the city. The fixated quality of the image may have resulted from the fact that, under this bombardment, the muscles of the eye automatically contracted--though as one ignorant (for I am a literary person) of the precise nature of such correspondences I only hazard this--producing a contraction, or fixedness, or knot of the image.

But let us have done with facts. For I delight in the

procreation, the swelling, the popping of images, I do indeed, so that the clumsiest, meanest, most resistent day is mine, mine to invent. And yet it just now occurs to me that here is the point of my writing to you. For it is by no means an unmixed blessing, this blasting inundation of the eyes. I assure you, it is most wearying. I have fallen upon this carnival of glass--in one sickening lift of the eyes. I assure you, I do not do it for my amusement.

Do you understand what I say? But for you I am only a ghost in the glass, a lyric in stained glass, a smash in a derelict place.

I recall having positioned myself at a street corner, though at the time my decision to pause was, I believe, quite arbitrary. I understand that a purpose, an ulterior motive may be inferred. For at this corner we regard a row of quaint three-story houses, as bright as whores in the backstreets of Paris, which thrust painted facades and spidery iron stairways; yet also withdraw, as it were, behind glass in ghostly climbing plants, evoking a Pre-Raphaelasian languor behind filthy windows. In short, an exquisitely human street, ruptured into an agony of stone, where girders, like a metal teeth-brace, rust, where a huge pipe disgorges, in a mat of dust, stone rubble into an iron cradle.

But I do not wish to seem emotive. Indeed this emotive landscape was not present to me at the time. Emotion surely springs from the hunger for emotion; and my single emotion at the time, if one may call it that, was vacant expectation. But if my choice of this intersection (I speak in a literal sense) was not entirely arbitrary, I would be happy to suggest that it was determined by the fact that I inevitably cross it on my way downtown, or to the exorbitant grocers for a loaf of bread and perhaps, on occasion, a little delicacy such as a date bar, of which I am very fond. I cross this intersection because it is almost immediately outside my apartment. Yet what caused me to pause there when, as is normally the case, I barely notice, I cannot say.

It occurs to me that I was brought up sharply by a high white building which appeared to arrange the scene for me. I was undoubtedly struck by a mystery and, while I concede that my mind may be deceiving me in that it was really I who arranged the scene, my intuition presses me to the opposite conviction: that it was 'it' (and I seize the white building only as the most authoritative feature) which assumed this responsibility, and that I was the mere passive observer.

Indeed I hope I will not be suspected of exaggeration or sleight of hand if I murmur that, on the evidence of my gaping senses, a cloud of light, like a luminous exhalation, flowed out of this building, a phenomenon unusually impressive, as you may imagine, in the dark city.

Retrospect restores our visual sense to its original purity. I see a high white building like a snow hill, like the blankness of a god. I see, squatting before it, the casual ruin of the city, old dark buildings like top hats, and, in front of these, the slumped smirks of smoking tenements like deformed breasts, smoke belching out of rusty nipples. And yet I see a breast like a snow hill.

But at the time I was not unaware of the need to approach this revelation cautiously, with concealment. I stood rooted to the spot; I pretended to have momentarily lost my way, a stranger to the city. With some pleasure I recall my accomplished deception. I peered, I scrutinised the map which an inexplicable foresight had placed in my satchel; I gazed with an apologetic and quizzical humour at passers by. A man in a broad-checked suit approached me as if to help, but I glared at him and he resumed his jaunty walk. Oddly, I sensed that an apology had

been at his lips. I had drawn out a notebook from successive layers of clothing, pockets crammed with junk, and started to scribble in it--hastily, for I realised my vision was being eaten up, gobbled, spat out by the cold in my hand. When sharply, without looking up, I was conscious of being observed. The words I had scribbled rushed manically against me. I knew that I had already pocketed the notebook and walked on. I knew also that I must observe my observer. When I did, I discovered his absence. My immediate reaction was to plunge a shaking hand into the deeply interior pocket where my wallet crouches. But I smiled and walked on.

The next two incidents did not occur chronologically, but in retrospect appear to have something in common. Therefore I will place the second after the first.

The first occurred in a Metro station where I had obtained a ticket from no desire to board a train, or to go anywhere. I could barely believe my luck, but I observed two blue nuns. With white unhealthy faces like grubs. Wearing blue gowns with a huge white cross sewn, with piercing strokes, into the right-side shoulder. They boarded a blue, white-gashed train.

The second incident took place at a street-corner pinned against a blasting stone construction. I had been crossing the street with the half-formed intention of entering a wooden shelter which backed onto a deep smoking pit, when for no reason I glanced to my left. An opportune moment. An hexagonal church swung up into the frigid air, its base of bleached stone, its steeple a brilliant metallic undersea green. And located by a curious distortion of perspective immediately in front and precisely centre of the church, a crimson phallus, a redbrick factory chimney. I was thunderstruck. What had arranged this instantaneous and complex picture? I believe that, in the first seizure, I had apprehended both at the same time; only afterwards did one displace the other.

But to return to what happened next, that is, to what happened in the restrictive sense of an 'event' after the first event, which is to say, after the appearance in the towering sky of the white building, or glimmering hill of snow, or snow breast.

In an alley I paused by a recess located far back of a vacant lot. At the back of the recess, a board, jaggedly nailed, announcing in scrawled red letters "PRIVATE : KEEP OUT".

A black fire-escape spiderily clung to a whitewashed, naked wall. Stone rubble, twisted bits of wood, a torn red 'T' shirt, heaped in the recess. Windows in the whitewashed wall boarded up. Generally, one gathered the unfortunate impression of shabbiness. Busted cars, live tongues of rusting metal gouged out, littered the vacant lot.

The alley deserted, deserted. Newspapers--with what news? What rainbleached pitch of life?--gusted, flapped over the rutted, peeling floor like broken birds or decapitated squawking chickens. The wind rattled in my head, probed orifices with icy fingers.

A scuffle behind me made me jump, though odd as it may seem I was prepared for it. A man hunched towards the recess under the burden of a painted door. Buckled under the painted door, walked into the rubble.

The door gushed from his back like a flame and like a swan sank into the steaming stone.

He straightened up. And brushed a little dust from the loud-checked lapel. I turned.

Perceived that the alley was encrusted in a crystalline frost of printed matter. I stooped and stuffed a handful of papers into

my several pockets, a little self-consciously lest a stranger should witness. In my haste I scraped a finger, for my nails are stunted like dwarfish trees on windward slopes high up.

These papers are before me now on my desk. I may confide to you that I am in possession of three, somewhat screwed, identical sheets, perhaps the length and breadth of my gripped hand, from the "Smithsons & Co. Motor Haulage Data Book."

As I emerged from the alley, two women came towards me, engaged in earnest and rapid conversation accompanied by jerky movements of gloved hands. Intermittently clutching compulsive swathed hands. They did not appear to see me.

A black brute of a dog jogged jauntily by, red tongue like the pulp of a fruit cascading from grinning mouth, testicles big as church bells.

A second alley I recall, but tiredly. I remember my strange fatigue like a blood-letting under the wind's shriek. I did not extract my notebook. My hand snuffled in my pocket like a pig. It seems I had paused from the compulsion of habit.

In the alley's crotch, a breaking of ways, vertically extended by a telegraph pole through which wires rushed. Fire-escapes bunched like varicose veins; dead branches of a tree like a Pre-Raphaelite's murderous head of hair, pinned against a low white building. The building: grey stone base, horizontal windows on lower floor, vertical on upper; eyes dragged up to the roof where an iron pipe like a crooked finger oozed smoke in a dead white sheet. A car wanting to turn made me pass on.

Before this narrative continues its proper course, I request your attention to the following scene. It takes place, let us say, in the city centre at noon. I ask you to consider it, though for no better reason than that all social occasions--and what is a story if not a social occasion?--are made bearable by a little light refreshment. A brief digression then.

The scene is this: a crowded thoroughfare at noon, it is lunch-time, men and women, released from work, clot the pavements. Very colourful. Cars grunt and squeal down the arteries, shops boom, buildings plunge like horses in a hazy sky, mystics with shaven heads lunge, people rush.

Your attention is referred to the man in dark glasses and the cream-coloured suit.

He wanders across the central intersection, attentive to his smart two-tone flesh and walnut brown shoes of an Italian sharpness. He pauses at the centre of the intersection and people idly stare as they pass by him, jostling.

He gazes along the avenue sweeping up into a dreamy green hill. With fixed attention.

It may be that the rust-coloured crane slowly revolving over the new building has caught his eye. It swings freely without a cargo. Now his attention returns, as suddenly, to his original direction which had prevailed, it seems unconsciously, prior to the interruption. The traffic begins to scream.

We watch him closely. His movements are jerky, and we are unable to discern the expression of his eyes. His body sweats under the cream-coloured suit.

He is buried in the lunch-time crowd.

My final image is of a building which does not properly belong to this narrative. In fact I did not view the building until some time after the events I have described as pertaining

to a very particular walk. I recall the exact circumstances.

I should explain that my visit was pre-arranged; I knew exactly how much time I should allow myself for the observation.

On arrival I crossed to the other side of the street so that the building loomed in opposition to me; and stationed myself behind a wall so that I should not be observed--in particular by a squalid group of labourers, who whistle at passing girls, sardonically stare at effeminate men, and whose features, I have often thought, are twisted out of mud.

A few yards from me, a big car moaned against the red light like a pregnancy, and then unleashed. In a big lower floor window of a fine grey stone house, a man in a blue shirt adjusted the blind. When I saw that he had seen me, I started to turn towards the building. High up a workman reached, his reaching arms forming a V, to catch a swaying iron bucket. The bucket was in his arms. Two workmen in steel helmets walked over to him. A hundred layers of naked stone over the flowing street.

And then, then, with the languid gesture of a 1920's

flapper I saw it. It came at me like a wave, a sea of iridescent glass, poising, or like a hill of sunshot glass in a perspective falling plain beyond immeasurable plain, height towering over height. The CITY.

In the state of ever forming. Absorbing mass and form from what it reflects. Surge of ideal form, and finished, finished. And to turn away is to wallow in the filth and agony of the real.

It is motionless. But if I move a dark wave flashes through it like mercury, in intimate correspondence. But if I do not move, the city withholds.

I see a humanless city piled into a clayey sky; as I turn, the glass is painted wet gold. I know that the city is behind it, like an octopus under a luminous sea.

I am a visitor to a strange country, Conrad's young Marlowe, knowing I am unequal to the demand. I sense, This vision comes but once, never again is it the same; I will see only reflections. I understand we live in a world of glass, which is our heaven and our hell. And our hell.

As I turn to leave, I feel at once used up and strangely eager.

Appendix.

I understand that an image has the quality of fixated attention, that it is more than a pause, a lull, a happy digression. Rather, it thrusts up, from the generally horizontal, centipede-like movement of our experience, a vertical, a shining pillar, an Aztec temple. It disdains its common neighbours, disdains the amorphous, jostling crowd of words. It is aristocratic, hating democracies.

And, like the aristocrat, it has maintained this attitude increasingly in a vacuum, in a place of no respect and no attention. As if, like a pounded boxer, it should be seen flailing its fists before a mirror in an empty dressing room. That is perhaps a little fanciful. But this is an extreme situation.

For it seems to me that our experience goes on thrusting up like geysers the stricken images of itself; and the brain

shuts its flabby fist around it--doing so in utter unrelatedness to everything but its own blind compulsion.

To establish this point, I must present a few more images, which I just happened to pick up during a recent walk through a section of the city with which I was unfamiliar. I might add that the purpose of the walk was to convey my cat to the vet; that swung in a white cage; that, after its operation, the halo of its belly under the spring sun protruded a red forest.

1. At the entrance/exit of a carpark: a spherical sign, information in green on a white disc, on top of a green pole like a stem mounted in a chapped base. Dead centre of the sign a 'P', and below this an arrow points up.

2. Before a garage: a tall man in sunglasses braced against the door, attempting to look in the window. Wearing a tan gaberdine, he strains.

3. In the gutter, a thrown-away newspaper is from a distance a pigeon.

4. I hurry in the direction of the sign of the Metro, but discover it is a sign among other signs on a signboard whose purpose must be to illustrate city signs.

(The cat moves its grey stripes now this way, now that, to the bars at either end. I lift up the cage in the sunlight and see its glassgreen amazed eyes.)

5. I am afflicted by a feeling of redundancy. I observe the sudden alley whose grimy flaking backs, like a prison, flush the contracted air with gorgeous washing.

(The cat, motionless, springs again and again in the barred sun of the cage.)

6. In the Metro: there is trouble at the barrier. The official in the glass cage will not allow the man in overalls to pass through the barrier. The man in overalls furiously gesticulates, but the official wears a blue shirt, and his beaked nose is like a falcon's. Men work with drills behind the glass cage, tearing up the floor. The official's wet lips thrust at the grating, but his energetic words do not sound above the prolonged shriek of the drills. Huge fragments of the floor are twisted up. The man in overalls presses against the grating. The official makes signs, a ticket waves in his splayed animal hand. The ticket is blue and perforated on one side and below this is a stream of red arrows like salmon shoving upstream.

The official in the glass cage will not let the man in overalls pass through the barrier. The cry of the drills has become deafening.

. . . . .

The Romantic

1 This morning I awoke

This morning I awoke. The quiet dark of the morning in the hut thrashed under my eyes like the wing of a bird: a sea-gull in the black wasted throes of its mutilation by oil. It may have been sleep for I awoke then to see the sun at the edge of the curtain paint its spectrum on the flesh-coloured plaster wall that tilted over me as though I had awoken in a boat in a soundless sea, and its wooden ribs splayed like a hand in front of my face. It was very still. I awoke to the vivid chatter of birds in the green terraces that drop through white buildings and red shutters to the manic blue of the sea which is called the Mediterranean. But my senses were not right for the chatter of birds was a spray of colour like a paint spray. I do not know how long I lay like this for I awoke then to see the vertical line of the sun pierce the billowing cloth and divide the room into separate darknesses like a rotten fruit. Then I awoke.

Now with the blue motion of a swimmer in the sea I draw out of the tossed bed where still she sleeps unseeing. The room is dark like a twilight and will be so through the long day. It

is a hut, set in a terrace; and at the base of the terrace the orange trees flame. I have plucked these oranges that hang as big as breasts from the green branches. Coarse-skinned as if scarred by an acne, and the pulp is grey and dry and not good to eat. But on the terrace below are cherry trees and the cherries are heavy and sweet and blood-coloured. I read Hemingway on the white wall under the fruitfat branches of the cherry tree, and watch the snarling machine in the pit of dust below me. Sometimes from the hut, within the dark of the hut, I have watched the men who work in the pit when it is painful with sun in the afternoon and its dust blooms heat. I have watched them squat on the white wall and reach up to the blood-hued clusters of cherries. They have been burned red and are loud and cheerful, and sometimes they are not there and the silence may be touched like a cat, always in the afternoon.

The curtains are heavy with sun and brush me like a hand, but now I am swinging apart the old wood shutters. Outside nothing moves as if under glass.

When we entered the glass halls of the Botanical Gardens the climate swelled beyond each door until we

made of upon leaves as big as boats and pale fine tendrils that cascade like human hair but was sticky to touch, and gorgeous petals with red stamens like dancers which I did not dare to touch. The air beneath the painted dome of the Gardens sweated, a stone fountain fell in a green pool, and the two stone-green cherubim enacted a frozen dance. It was very tiring. I was exhausted, heavily excited. Outside it was cold. Like insects giant bronzed tractors clung to an artificial hill in the air, over the green park. We went to a deserted cafe and ordered coffee, and my lips made partial ellipses on the edge of the cup, while the people who worked there were bored, the wind moved in the green park like an animal, business was slack, it was the wrong time of the year, and those who did not know us sat at a table and played cards. I did not recognise the game. It was repeated over and over with the tedium of long days and the wind that blew over the flowerless beds.

When I have opened the shutters I see the terraces descend to the unreal sea, it is so blue and violent. The palms that snare my eyes are still, and I imagine the cruel beauty of those trunks that are folded in bandages like bark. The leaves thrust out stiffly. Below me now the lizard is

tuck to the white wall, tensed, its heavy eyes protruding, it appears to be relaxed. The reddish vulnerable mouth is open under the hooded head and emerald markings course along the back, and underneath a bruising shadow, and now it is gone.

It is early morning and the grass holds a lemonly cool, but the steep stone steps are flat blazing blades.

The young man squat and dark, hair slicked back, and the pimple throbbed like a heart under the cheek. He dreamed of a shining city ringed by ice-mountains, where men with pearl-handled pistols lounge on the street corners. The snowy cap of the pimple fell to a green rim the colour of underwater, then to rims of other shades, like a set stone.

It is still night in the hut. The girl's body crawls like a white spider across the bed towards me.

2 We saw an old woman

We saw an old woman on the road to the pottery town. The men had started work in the pit under the cherry trees, and it was alight with sun. The red machine sucked and spat earth, the road a white line before us. We listened to the thud of our sandals on the road. The sun like a stone in

ourding quarries o sky.

I had been in the patio after breakfast, reading Camus, when the lizard had appeared, as if attached to the wall like a brooch. I had been reading L' ETRANGER when the lizard had appeared, and picking my nose when the red handkerchief fell to the ground where it bloomed in the sandy ground.

We could hear the thud of our sandals in the empty road when the old woman appeared at the end of the white line. She was close enough now to be distinguished as an old woman in a cream-coloured suit and a brown hat which veiled her, for her back was bent as she comes towards us.

Now she is close and I see that the skin about her eyes and mouth is furrowed, and the lips are moving. Under the white suit she is a wrinkled sack, and the tail of a rat threads from her moving lips.

She has passed us without looking up. It is sunny, and soon we shall be in Valauris.

3 We sat in the pottery town

We sat in the pottery town. We had walked along the main street, observing the painted swollen pots that many

people seemed to be buying. Many of the pots are brightly coloured and with a hard glossy finish like the waxy foliage that gleams under a white sun.

I had been reading a book by Robbe-Grillet but had thrown it down with distaste when it was decided that we should walk to the pottery town. The book had fallen carelessly, its pages screwed under it. It made a shadow like a scorpion in the sand.

As we walked and looked at the pots, it was sunny. I sweated and my body was like a dog on a leash behind me.

It was awfully uncomfortable. I kept repeating to my wife, Do let's sit down, Do let's stop for a drink.

We walked high up the town, for towns like this are built on a hill. It was cool between the high shadowing plaster walls of the ancient dwellings that were filthy, that were leprous, where children played. As we returned, we watched a big muscular rat in the main street fall under a car. But no-one had appeared to notice.

We sat down at a pavement table, and the woman who brought us drinks is dark, wearing a flower print which a young boy tugs.

In the square flowers are sold, bright and gay in the sun. Now the woman throws white ropes of disinfectant

From a [illegible] into the stinking place against the cafe, and a man in a blue car emerges from the opening, adjusting his trousers. A fat Algerian sucks at a cigarette butt at the table over. Dark hollows swell in his face, his eyes an obsession, as he draws on the last quarter-inch. But the cigarette is dead, and then I look up the narrow gorge. It is very quiet and peaceful as we pour white tubes of pastis and water into our mouths.

I was saying to my wife, What do you think about that, What do you think about that.

In the cafe

In the cafe it is dark and close; a white candle is set in the mouth of an olive-coloured wine flask at the centre of the table. All tables in the cafe, which is low-ceilinged and swirling, have this arrangement, and one looks up suddenly to a flowing procession of lights as in a church.

We had walked along the winding path into the foothills, through the morning that had shown us the snow mountains. We walked into the foothills but the mountains

[illegible] and took root at a roadside chapel, dusty [illegible] grit of the road, where a candle fluttered in [illegible] gloom. But in the valley burnt glass was [illegible] amongst the harsh rocks, and the bed of the stream [illegible] crickets and insects clicked in the dead white air.

Arranged haphazardly about the wine flask are a number of dishes, two wine glasses that hold a dry claret, and a blue pack of cigarettes clumsily torn.

But in the valley I crouched on the dry bed of the stream to urinate, and no-one was to be seen, and in the empty hut I found a gutted mattress where once someone had lain, and a cigarette packet.

The young woman, her face shadowed and hair arranged in a dark bun, has set another dish before us. Her blouse is cut low, her arms matted with fine blond hairs, but her hands are red. Now she is gone, but the arm has moved away from the shoulder to set a dish on the table. In silence. Before we resume the conversation, I note the huge stain on the table-cloth.

We have been discussing literature, and with some excitement I have been challenging the construction of literature. Suggesting that if literature is to do anything now the inessential, which has been considered essential,

n't be dropped. And when I come down to it, what moves me in literature is the accident, the whim, the forgotten glimpse.

My companion bites her lips. She does not agree with my argument because it does not make sense. The hollows of her unseen hands are damp with sweat.

But then I concede, Ofcourse I am a Romantic and this is not the age for Romantics, the act no longer corresponds to the passion. I say this with a certain tipsy air which almost upsets my wine glass. But then I say, Time is all wrong in literature, Time is a bitch in heat.

My companion is biting her lips. I realise that I am becoming drunk, and soon will say something foolish if I have not already done so.

So, I agree. Oppose the romantic passion. The noble and the beautiful are a bad taste in the mouth.

I have smoked too many cigarettes and my breath is unpleasant. Finally I say, Don't you find this conversation improbable? The cafe is now very noisy, I try to attract the waitress but she doesn't see me.

In the cafe we have been discussing our impressions of the day. Excited, we attempt to outdo each other. It is a psychological game, and my companion applies to a polished ___

nail a bitter metal file.

She says, I didn't say that. When did I say that? Why do you say that to me?

But I have forgotten what I did say, and am becoming steadily drunker. As I look up I see a flowing procession of lights as in a church. In the valley I imagined a huge wasted mouth. I lit a cigarette from the blue packet. The wine is cheap, harsh. I hold it in my mouth before I swallow it. We have been discussing what we did today, that we might remember.

Remember the old town on the hill, the flattened roofs of Roman tiles, the coloured shutters, the fleshy plaster walls.

I will remember.

Remember the long beach, the olive clusters of weed, the warm water about our limbs.

I will remember.

Now the candle is burned low, smoking in the olive flask set in the white wine basket. I place my empty glass over the huge stain in the cloth. The cafe almost empty, we are almost the last to leave, and the waitress is impatient but I do not mind her, nor think about her. At the table over, a man and a woman intimately converse. It is a mirror-

reflection. As I do, the man holds his glass in front of him, and though mine is empty, his own is half-filled with a red wine. As my companion does, so the woman wears a white dress, tied in a knot at the breast. The candle has almost fallen inside the flask, and is beginning to smoke. We are the last to leave. The waitress smiles, but she has not liked it.

The waitress has set two glasses on the table and a jar of water. The glasses are partially filled with a milky fluid like sperm, which is cloudy when the water is added. It is important not to add too much water, for then the drink loses its harshness and is like a passion gone cold. As I lift it to my mouth, I experience a keen sensation of displacement. It is as if we had just arrived and are now preparing to converse. But now we are leaving. We climb the steep night of the road to the hut, and the lights of the finger of land across the dark bay are lit.

Tomorrow perhaps we will see the mountains. It is still very early. The casinos have recently opened.

Each morning the sun paints the wall a painful white, and the lizard is fixed against it like a huge emerald brooch. Tensed as if to spring, it is quite still and seemingly relaxed. Underneath, the blue bruise of shadow, and then it is gone, and the wall could not be whiter than it is.

By the Mimosa tree

By the Mimosa tree we have paused. My sister pointed to the tree as we were passing, and we have paused. The tree is a golden spray over the wall which I am able to look over. Here every wall appears white because of the sun's glare, and are hard to look upon. This is also true of the road and the delicate yellow flower is a relief from the whiteness.

Sometimes I have confessed to my sister that I see again the sodden trees whose wet bark rips in my nails of our country. But she is irritated. But I remember in the bus the seat was warm and damp and I had to tear myself from it, and I dreamed I was on the river bank and the trees willows flooding the water and touching my face with such coolness, such obliteration as I passed under them. But my sister's voice was harsh when I told her this.

As we pause by the Mimosa tree, a finger of stone, the lighthouse, points out of the corrupt blue of the sea. In the still day palms thrust up green bearded chins like dwarves from the burning beach, which cannot be seen from where we are standing, by the Mimosa tree.

The dwarf is pointing at the yellow flare of the tree. His back exaggeratedly bent, his eyes small, black, his nose a swelling in the centre of his face. He speaks to us rapidly in a language foreign to me. Apparently he wants me to climb the wall, which is too high for him, to pluck the mimosa.

He is dressed in a smart yellow and black chequered suit, and a white collar with a broad red tie. A little below the knot of the tie there is an emerald tie pin shaped like a scorpion. His brown walking stick waves impatiently at the yellow flower. Excited. Voluble. I turn to my sister for his meaning, then back to him, then to the gold fountain of mimosa in the air.

I am pressed to mount the wall. I do so. I have done so a little clumsily and feel foolish, but the road is empty. But for my sister and the dwarf, who now eagerly punctuates the air with his walking stick.

I tear some sprays of the flower, which is a dull green, and drop to the ground. The dwarf is not appeased. He points impatiently at the yellow Mimosa tree. I must again mount the wall. Finally he has enough, the fixated accent of his eyes over the flowers.

Now he is pointing his walking stick at my sister, who reminds me I have forgotten to obtain a spray of mimosa for her. He is a perfect gentleman, but perhaps he does not know that she is my sister, but believes her to be my lover or my wife. We do not greatly care for one another, and mimosa grows in plenitude in the garden of the hut where I am staying with the woman who is my lover.

I am beginning to feel childish. I consider it all an elaborate joke. When I again mount the wall, I am conscious of their eyes. But I smile good-humouredly and return to the ground.

The dwarf nods unsmilingly, his chin thrust in the yellow flower. I present the spray to my sister, and when I look up the dwarf is gone. The road white and empty. Behind the Mimosa tree construction is going on, but this, being early afternoon, is the siesta.

6 In the dark of the hut

In the dark of the hut we have made love on the thin

bed, which occupies a corner of the room far from the window. The table is under the window, and the sink is in the corner opposite the bed. The hut is a fisherman's hut, shutters and door thick and blackened, and outside a huge iron ring has been twisted into the flaking plaster wall. There the donkey was tethered. A cool damp smell like urine is in the hut, but outside the sun rains fire over the baked earth.

Today we mutilated a nest of hornets in the roof of the hut that houses the chemical toilet. We did it with a chemical spray. The nest swarmed like a giant wart over my crouching head, and I felt sick in the stomach. I stood on the white wall and fired sprays in the interval between the door and the flat roof, and like lions the golden bodies roared in the sun. They were burned and did not die easily. I fired again, and the nest was like an abandoned city. We laughed about it, but still I do not feel all right.

We have made love in the dark of the hut. Now we lie on the bed, watch the pencil point glow of the cigarettes like fireflies. I inhale deeply, unwilling to light a fresh cigarette.

We have made love in the dark of the hut, two lovers

in the South of France. It is my first time abroad, and I am very naive. We will have some amusing anecdotes.

We speak slowly, heavily, exhale the words like the smoke from our cigarettes. The white sheet is coiled about the woman's navel. I wonder if the fisherman slept where we have made love, and dreamed of big fish in the night.

She asks, Why do you write when you do not know what it is you have to say, or if you have anything to say?

I pause. I write because I have to.

What does that mean?

I write because I want to.

What? What do you want?

I don't know.

I would tell her I feel pain. I would say, I cannot have what I want, but go on wanting, and hate myself for this. I would say, Everything. But tomorrow we will have breakfast on the patio where the sun falls whitely like an amnesia. And I would say, The world has pulled away from me, and by hating it I try to bring it back. But I must also admit that I do not know what the world is, I do not any more know my desires, and I am feeling a little foolish.

We have fallen asleep. I dream that outside this dark hut the sun falls in fire on the earth. Several novels that I have been reading through this vacation are positioned on the wooden floor at the side of the bed, and the nerveless fingers of a sleeping hand are suspended over them.

The lizard is attached like an emerald brooch to the low wall. Tensed to spring, it is quite still and apparently relaxed. The reddish vulnerable mouth gapes in the hooded head, and a blue bruised shadow envelops its belly. Now it is gone. But the dark of the hut is filled with the sound of our sleeping.

. . . . .

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THE HORSES

(After the story, "The Raid", by L. Tolstoy)

1

WAR

Is the deaths of fighting men. Of men that also sleep, childlike and impersonal under the dying suns of the night, as if a hand out of the ungentle dark has shut their eyes. Or torn, ravished into masks of death. Of men that squat in ditches under the endless rain, crouch in clouding pools, their limbs tucked under them. Or driven into the mud like stakes. Of men that eat, whose gashed mouths spill food. Of forgotten men, remembered in Death in stone places.

But War is not as it was. Where once it grimaced, it now does not have time, or occasion, to arrange its face. Or arranges it too well, and is faceless.

I have never known a war; have awaited behind the screen's displacing image, behind the flowing merging images of the age, this thing they call war and other important things that we must be reminded of lest we forget, and the reminder is but a fresh forgetting, but I do forget because, like one in a coma or a hunger strike, these things are intravenously introduced via some hidden jerking vein, and I am sure I do not intend any irony by this other than the acceptable kind which the better people enjoy as a sort of aperitif.

Yet once in the city, in a stone heat under blind white quarries of sun, some blown-up photographs were pressed into my nerveless hands, showing napalm like a red storm upon unknown children. I say "like a red storm" because a voluptuous image is surely appropriate, and I do feel that if we are unscrupulous in all else we must have scruples in the use of language. I believe I said, "No thank you", and a little self-consciously sucked at the icecream cone that had squalled across my wrist. I felt sick from the heat and traffic, and threw the cone into the gutter where it swarmed like an amputated hand.

DEATH

Is what happens to men at war, death under the smashing rain where bodies like bread crumple in blood. Deaths unremembered, and Death remembered in stone places.

I have never known a death, not with any degree of intimacy. It happened one morning to a man in the street. His lips parted in a sort of grin, disclosing the red tip of his tongue. It was very hot that day. It may have been the heat. It is difficult to think in the heat. I would be able to think in a cool place. I walked into my cold conscious body in an airconditioned restaurant, and ordered a slice of yellow melon which leapt into my mouth and was gone all too quickly.

2

The horses, dark nervous Arabians, went into the river, invaded the quick night of the river uncleanly, not as one horse, and the moon in the river, the floating moon, stuck to the river, fell upon it again and again like a smashing moth; then the darkness that dropped like a hood over the white head of the horse, head twisted blasing,

eyes plunging, mouth tearing Guernican guernican; then the darkness so that my riding hands did not know the river from the beast, hands riding away from me in darkness, while in the black gloves of my fists was a muscular thing like a rope, a rope at which I strained with all my falling body; then out of the darkness rose the hand huge and sinewy, and I was reeling and I was falling, only a young man only a young man, and the beast lifted and fell, circled, circling me, dragging a thick flannel tongue of sickness into my mouth, but the wind struck my mouth gagging me and I could not retch, and the world would not fall away from me would . . . not . . . And all subsided with the coming of the light, and the morning unfurled the white banner of the new day, and I crawled behind the tent far from the shouting men far from their thick laughter, their sluggish worm-like lips, and out of the prettiness of my face, the prettiness they mocked, my red tongue stuck and I retched in the wet claying grass, the too-green grass, watching flies drum the skin of the tent; and the sun falling upon my neck, my brow in the baked mud, my eyes throbbing against the darkness of the earth.

I am a young man frightened yet thrilled by this time of war. I watch the others carefully and learn how to acquit myself in new and terrible situations.

This was the night crossing. My first. The night was close like a man's breath on my face like a man's body on mine, and my tunic and breeches stuck to my skin. A heavy damp moon glistened somehow obscene, like a woman's breast; the sky like a black cone, wedged in by thick dark mats of forest, pierced the army the confusion of men and horses the stamping and cursing, the army like a broken insect, like an insect under the black heel of the night.

I had started up in my sleep at first not knowing where I was. Observing a light in the Captain's tent I walked over and found him sprawled in his chair, still as a statue, and a strong-smelling cigarette dropping from his thinly parted lips. He looked up.

"Well lad. Well. Can't sleep eh? Like me."

It was a distinctly northern dialect. We talked into the early hours of the morning. I supposed from this and similar conversations that I knew my captain pretty well; but later events were to prove how mistaken I was. But I daresay I was very naive.

I had started up from an oppressive sleep, a fitful dreaming sleep, several times during the night; started, hearing only the dragging sound of an army sleeping, an army that took breath like an animal: a laboured brute breathing. Once I awoke to find my fingers wet, scraping the ground at my side like sticks.

A man had shaken me, whispering, "the Company is making ready to leave sir" .

"What's that!"

A silence. The a voice like the flat of a spade striking the ground, a voice surly and grudging.

"We're ready to leave . . . sir".

The man spat into the night, the gob of spit quivering at my side.

"All right. All right." Trying to control my voice. I felt the burning eyes of the soldier caress me. My hands were clenched under the rough army blankets, so rough it had given me a rash, my heart heaving in my breast.

"All right. You can go now."

I tried to make my voice gruff, but it was shrill,

complaining like a woman's voice. The man was crouched stupidly, then sprang up with a snort and left.

My tongue was dry, coiled inside my mouth. I wet my lips: blistered the wind frose them. I was young. All this was new to me. I had not finished University when the call to action came. The Ideas of Plato filled my head. I had met with new and strange ideas entertained by but a few of my young fellow officers. One chap, an ensign like myself, from whose chin and upper lip there sprouted rust-coloured growths of hair, has introduced me to a most curious (no doubt typically 'European') philosophy called Anarchism. Raising his hands above the Red Furies of his hair, he would proceed to enlighten me as to the necessity, no the irrelevance of contradiction, no, contradiction is the grimacing mask that tradition puts on to preserve itself, in the conveying of ideas, no the death of ideas, about life, no for what is life? And so on in an altogether inflammatory but finally most tedious fashion. In fact he showed some good sense in only one point, to wit that his theory best fitted the most

useless of occupations, the occupation most helpless to change anything, which occupation is of course the making of fiction.

I stumbled vividly awake by the dark noiseless knots of standing men; startled by a sudden achingly dear melody that rose into the stillness of the night, rose, and clutching the slow graceful curve of its notes like morning dew to a blade of grass, was all the sorrow, all the sad blighted hunger of men on the dark earth under the stars; that rose as it seemed out of nothing, and was bitten off as sharply, as utterly as a knife at the throat of a sleeping man.

3

"You had better go now."

The Captain lit a turkish cigarette, the dungy smelling smoke whispering from his thin pressed lips. He was a stocky man, his hair grey and balding, his features, once handsome, now felled, sunken.

The Ensign left the tent, twisting his body around as he pulled aside the flap to face his captain, but the Captain was not looking at him.

The Captain was looking at the book which lay face-down in the dirt: a collection of stories by Joseph Conrad. The book was bent open some way through the story called "Typhoon", which the captain had been reading, screwing up his pale eyes at the words through the thick, watery-lensed glasses he wore, when the Ensign had surprised him in the dead of the night.

The Captain and the Ensign had been discussing bravery in war, and the ensign had been very eager to press upon the captain his ideas, which admittedly were not his own but those of Plato. Finally the Captain, raising a hand--a gesture bespeaking his infinite weariness--, had said, "There's nothing to talk about. War is war. It breeds like men."

And the Ensign had risen from the couch, while the Captain, with averted face, had stumblingly completed his thought, "What has war to do with anything?", upon which he had brought the flat of his hand down on the Ensign's

nude and cherubic buttocks with a resounding slap.

When the ensign had left, the captain quickly looked at his face in the mirror, pinching the soft lip of skin under his eyes until they looked back at him, bloodshot.

"I am old, he muttered. "Old".

4

The Lietenant twisted the waxed ends of his moustache with long tapering fingers. The moustache was stiff, black. He gripped the skin under the cheekbones as if he would peel it off. It was loose, flabby. He gripped it between thumb and forefinger, twisting it until his heavy lips, forcing baqk, grinned at him.

The Lieutenant, it was said, had a way with the ladies. Once in a rooming house in the town of - , the concierge, a fine old man who had been wounded in the Napoleonic wars so that he walked with a permanent limp, now honourably retired with a small pension—the concierge, conducting his nightly round, had discovered the lieutenant at the head of the stairway: crouched, his face in his

hands, whispering. The concierge, his face, as he told us afterwards, "like stone", had tapped him on the shoulder, "gentle-like as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do", and inquired, "Is everything all right sir?" (But what the concierge, that brave old man, was thinking to himself at the time, we can only guess.) And the lieutenant, so the story goes, had torn away his hands, thrusting toward the concierge a face smeared with lipstick, red lipstick.

He rode a white surging stallion viciously, his spurs tearing at the quivering flanks of the animal.

The Lieutenant coiled the loose piles of skin around his thin fingers. "Aaaahh . . ."

He released his face. Ywo red points flamed high up the sallow cheeks. The Lieutenant ducked his head.

Ah but didn't he know about the Captain and the Ensign. He knew their game all right. He would make them a laughing stock in the camp.

The Lieutenant scribbled in his diary:

"I am not unaware that some see through me, I am not an insensitive man. I am known as a cruel man, a man who

has a way with the ladies. This fool& no-one. But no-one says anything to me, because of the war. The War. Which war? Which bloody war are they talking about? I don't know of any war.

Last night the Ensign came into my tent . . ."

The diary slapped the dirt floor, ground beneath the Lieutenant's black polished boot.

His face leapt into the glass weeping.

5

The sun hit the back of my head. The army went forward desultorily into the afternoon. My horse had rubbed the inside of my thighs raw. I put a hand behind my back, tugging at the soaked cloth that clung to it. I rubbed my neck, burned by the sun, red ugly. The sun high in the sky. The army's feet trod ashen grass. My horse picked its steps between the stones, harsh white stones, deadness of the earth, my eyes screwed against the sheeting flame of the sky.

There was a crack, another, and yet another. Little

snowy white balls like cottonwool suspended in the haze.

"The enemy", I thought.

We were enclosed by trees. The trees were green and luscious, I wanted to rest my head in their folage, my face brushed by soft green hands of leaves. I wanted to feel their hands at my fluttering waist.

There were riders. Behind the trees. The white grey-dappled black bodies of the horses swam under the water-green twilight of the trees, like groping fingers.

"Hey!" I shouted. "Hey Hey!" the nearest of the soldiers looked at me, then looked away.

The riders were breaking from the trees, in the same instant the horses leapt from the trees with the zippered lightning of their hooves. I raced my horse to meet them, grased by the guffaw behind me, I plunged over the field of grass over the white throats of daisies, my two arms raised my body straining to meet them. I came up to a rider. In one swift movement he bent down from his horse, snatching a wild red rose and placing it in the breast of my grey tunic, and with a twist of the horse's neck, turning, rode off.

I returned slowly, my face averted from the laughter

of the men.

"Go play with yourself in the wood", one of them said.

Only the Captain's face looked pained. My eyes were afraid of the Lieutenant.

The army went forward desultorily into the afternoon.

6

"My mother", said the lieutenant.

"Yes . . .?" urged the young ensign in a whisper.

"My mother loves me", said the lieutenant, "but . . ."

"But . . .?"

"Her love has gobbled me up like a snake."

"Come", whispered the ensign. "Come".

The lieutenant buried his bullet-shaped head in the ensign's breast.

"There. There", cooed the ensign, lifting the coarse black mat of hair like horse's hair with a simious motion of his shapely head. The lieutenant's head jerked, "I . . . I'll

spit on her grave." The ensign's face was white, serene. His hand drew up the long shaggy mane, allowing it to fall back, then twining it around his delicate fingers. A faint smile played about his full red mouth, his eyes drooped under long brown lashes to the book that lay face-down in the dirt: a copy of Melville's"Billy Budd".

The lieutenant gazed up out of stricken black eyes; the ensign waggled a finger at him amiably.

Outside in the glusy darkness, in the night that was like a huge knotted trunk, the stars looked down on the camp.

"Christ!" The voice lifted, and was felled, behind the Lieutenant's tent.

"Shut it, you fool", hissed the second voice. "This is getting good."

"Don't hog it then", said the first. "But that's just like you", he added with a sneer, "you get yours in, that's all right isn't it?"

"For Jesus' sake shut it!" said the other, with a threatening twist of his body. You've got to be first in this game", he added defiantly. If it wasn't me, it would be another, wouldn't it?"

"I wouldn't worm myself round the pigs like you do", said the first pettishly. "I've got my pride."

"Who says I do?" snapped the second. "Who says that?"

"Well, what about that coat then?"

"Oh that!" Disgustedly. "Look, d'you want a look or don't you?"

Positions were exchanged. Now the second voice fell away in the night, and the first squatted by the tent.

The latter giggled, his lips curled back in a yellow smile. "We've got to have something to amuse us in this bloody joke of a war", he thought. Squinting into the hole of light made by his thumb and forefinger. "Some war!" Seeing the lieutenant bury his mouth in the pale stalk-like neck of the young ensign. "They"—his sour teeth sucked at the word—"They don't want us in the streets, that's what it comes down to. Manning the barricades."

"Hurry up", said the second voice. "I'm dead on my feet here." He thought, flapping his arms, "This war's no bloody joke. No bloody joke when it comes to spying on a couple of queers for something to do. But me"— he pressed a blunt thumb mysteriously against the side of his head,

which was coated with close-cropped hair like iron filings--

"Me. I'm different. I'm getting out with something. No pussy-footing for me for the rest of my life." He glanced scornfully at the dog-like attitude of his companion. "It's every man for himself, as the saying goes. But not every man gets what he wants."

In the camp the lit-up tents whispered out of the misty night like mushrooms.

The Captain stood outside his tent in an easy but unmistakably military posture. One hand rested lightly on his hip, one immaculately shod leg leaned carelessly against the other so that the toe of the dark polished boot dug into the soft earth, twisting gently in the soft earth. The smoke from the inevitable turkish cigarette drifted whitely against his face.

He was without movement. His face like a stone. It was a fine night. He had just received news of his mother's impending death. But no surrender, no defeat, was registered in the solid old soldier's face.

The Captain was engaged in observing the two men outside the Lieutenant's tent.

7

It was a quiet and uneventful night but for the shrieks of revelry that issued from the General's dark vehicle as like a wind it rode through the camp at three in the morning.

A soldier on duty, one Private Slovich, mused bitterly, but not without a little envy, on the General's 'sorties' to the neighbouring town. He stamped his icy feet, watching the retreating light. "It's all right for some", he thought.

The following day the General was given private and confidential information of a pregnant rebellion within the ranks; and several men, presumed to be the ringleaders, were incarcerated.

8

The horses, dark and flesh-coloured Arabians with

high quick skulls, went into the river, the blackish red lip of the bank bursting under the slow resisting fall of the hooves; fell into quick holes, dragged into quiet holes; black hurting rings of river riding up my thighs as my horse, each man's horse, was drawn into a separate sucking pocket of the river; then, rising out of the livid river, starting up like miracles out of the moonstruck hill of water, out of separate eyes; but oh the black that swallows my mouth like a tongue, but oh the black that consumes my living body; and I am old so old and life is a bitter thing; but horse stench invades my face, the body kicks bending the open huge shrieking mouth at me Guernican guernican, and I am a thing, a blunt hitting thing in this river that under a strange moon is like my own flesh; but tired tired as this blackish red lip of the bank raises me back into my body; sluggish old on this bank, behind me still the shrill storm of words coming out of the river.

I sit humped on my horse, breathing hoarsely.

This was the night crossing. How many? How many. A life made up of night crossings.

Men ride out of the river, shouting laughing.

I cross from one bank to another to another to another. But always it is the same bank, the same crossing.

This rider than comes toward me. Who is he? I must say something, guard myself. These men are cruel. My mouth breaks wind. He turns, his eyes are holes, rides off. What did I say? What will he do? He is coming back, he and two others. I do not see their eyes. My mouth breaks wind. I cross from one bank to another to another to another. But always it is the same bank, the same crossing.

The Ensign is one of them. I try to say something, but his hand is pressed against my lips, having the odour of milk. His mouth whispers at me.

This was the night crossing. The first to attain the bank, the Captain rested easily on his horse, his body twisted slightly so that he might observe his men emerge from the river. As I drew up with him, I detected no sign of the recent struggle in the good old soldier's face. It was like stone, animated only as a consequence of the smoke that drifted from his turkish cigarette. My days of war are now long past and the Captain, God rest his soul, is long dead,

but often in the quiet of my lonely evenings, he comes to me. And invariably a turkish cigarette hangs from the faint smile of his lips.

9

Private Slovich crawled on all fours behind the tent. "Funny goings-on", he whispered to his companion.

"Yes", agreed Private Patlov, his voice hollowed by its nearness to the damp, fecund earth.

"What next is what I say", said Private Slovich. "It makes you think when your captain goes off his head, don't it?" He paused as if in thought. "Straight as an oak was the captain, I wouldn't've thought he had it in 'im."

"He's the same as all the rest", replied Private Patlov. "What can you expect from officers?". A trace of disgust in his voice as he tenderly raised the flap of the captain's tent. "It's all that in-breeding. Incestuous is what it is, if you ask me."

Private Patlov brought up a gob of phlegm from the back of his throat and spat it into the overcast starless night.

"Jesus. Just listen to him babbling. It don't make no sense."

The Captain's voice came clearly through the wall of the tent. "When the worm invades the eye, when the mouth is a foetid hole, give it up give it up! When the eye sees into itself, when the mouth gnaws at itself, it is time it is time! Oh Beauty what a Beast you turn out to be! Oh damned Understanding! Oh God what a Foulness is your gift! Oh Life, like a blind black mole sticking out of my head!"

"It just don't make no sense", repeated Private Patlov, as if conscious of having made a profound discovery.

"What does?" responded Private Slovich philosophically.

"What on earth does?"

"I see I see I see", came the captain's exultant voice through the dripping canvas wall of the tent.

"Here, have a bit of biscuit", Offered Private Slovich, tearing him off a lump, and meditatively cramming the larger piece into his mouth.

"It keeps the worms happy".

10

As the horses rode into the river, the Lieutenant

remembered his unhappy schooldays. He had always been the first in his class to raise an eager, straining hand in response to the teacher's question. But he had always been ignored.

"Now I have my chance", he thought with triumph, as his horse's hooves ripped into the soft bank.

"Now I have my chance", he thought, his white stallion prancing in the turgid stream.

"I will make them all know me."

The horses went into the river, each horse, each rider crumpled into darkness, into chaos but me, but this white horse I ride alone in the darkness of the world, blazing my horse a flame leapt out of my gripping thighs. I see the river's stones at which the river tugs like a drowned man's hair; I hear cries, curses like the agony of men wrung out of the darkness; but I am this body thrusting through the hollow wind, I am my two fists raised in this sterile wind, where all else is shivered into bits, the watching face shivered into bits as the hand attacks the glass that murders again and again; I punch a wide wound into all that steals me from myself, like the fingers of the witch.

To quote my favourite author Lawrence, I am Man-Alive.

Now I have reached the bank. Like a tower upon my white horse that paws the earth, impatient, I look about me.

There squats the captain on his donkey of a horse, like an old woman.

There is the ensign fleeing to the wood to retch his being.

There is the army that drags out of the river like a man picking at himself.

And here am I like a tower upon my white horse.

But nobody sees me.

11

I said, "Here are the notes. Meticulously compiled."

"Of course", I confided in a whisper, "I had to do a bit of spying on the men to get them."

"But in the long run, taking things as a whole, it's good for the army—and therefore for society at large . . ." (Am I defending myself against possible self-reproach? Does my fearful haste uncover me?)

I said with rising concern, "I hope—I believe—I have impressed upon you the . . . delicacy of my position." (Why then does he not say something? He looks up at me from under his scrofulous eye-lashes, but says not a word.)

In height about five feet, or a trifle under, the General showed me the whites of his eyes.

"Of course, of course", he murmured, "I entirely understand." (But why does this idiot stare at me so? I do detest being made to feel self-conscious, I am unable to control the twitching of my lips.)

"After that . . . trouble we need all the info we can get hold of."

"But", he barked, looking up at me out of his oyster-coloured eyes, "perhaps you might give me a brief summary of your findings." (These damned bureaucrats! What the devil are they doing in the army!)

"Certainly, certainly", I cried, clearly delighted that the interview had reached this pass. "I've found", I went on, "that there are three main categories of men in the ranks."

"The first", I said after a calculated pause, "comes under the category of "Lazy Dog"."

"The second under the general category of "Inherently Useless"."

"And the third under the category of "Good for Nothing"."

"I see. I see," murmured the General. "And what would you suggest?"

I straightened up, looking him full in the eye.

"Authority, sir. Authority."

12

The Lieutenant sat in his tent, his feet dragged up to his crotch in an attempted Yoga position. It was a

half-lotus, but one knee stuck up stubbornly from the ground though the lieutenant struck it with the flat of his hand, wrenched it, swore at it, even tried massaging it luxuriantly up and down.

"Aaah, I'll never do it", he cursed, drawing his long cruel fingers across his red perspiring face.

"Of course you will", gently urged the young Ensign. "Rome wasn't built in a day. Great Literature wasn't created at one sitting." And he coiled his white body about him like a serpent, performing a sinuous motion with his shapely head, his brow rising and falling in whose bland surface, under the tumbling patent black hair, a reddish knot of veins sometimes bulged.

"I see. I see," mused the lieutenant, casually observing this red jungle that protruded from the ensign's skull.

"Like this". And he brought a jagged rock down on to the ensign's pretty face, so that the blood squirted through the nostrils.

The Lieutenant stood in his glossy black boots

over the mangled ensign, pulling absent-mindedly at his moustache. A book lay face-down next to the ensign's head in the red dirt: a copy of Lawrence's "The Prussian Officer."

"Now, he thought, "having crossed the river, we can finally get down to real business. There's a war to be fought, in case you didn't know."

As the lieutenant left his tent, the sun burned powerfully in his face. He seemed to hear the sound of a great commotion, but all that he saw of the flying horse was the jagged splinter of sun glinting in its cruel hooves, that was then buried in his forehead. Then darkness descended.

13

"Funny business", said Private Slovich morosely to Private Patlov as he crept on all fours behind the funeral tent.

. . . . .

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

"It doesn't seem to be finished", said my friend, sucking at his pipe.

"Damn this pipe! Give me a cigarette, will you."

I offered him a turkish cigarette from the cigarette case, nineteenth-century I believe, embossed with a silver vine.

"Thanks." He looked at the cigarette critically. "Not bad", as he tasted it.

We were at the house of my friend — , discussing, as the autumn rain drifted smokily over the flat grey land, a certain story written by a mutual acquaintance, himself too shy (or too humble) to present the story in person. However, he earnestly wanted a critical opinion of it, and since we had nothing better to do I had decided to oblige him. My friend, smoke dribbling from his half-open mouth, reclined luxuriantly on the bear-skin that had been carelessly arranged over the deep sofa. I sat on a bare wooden chair of undistinguished origin.

"Well", he managed at last with a yawn. "What do you think of it?"

I was about to give aa robust and not too sympathetic opinion when I was brought up strangely by a shy concern, as if I had written the story and was about to be subjected to a painful examination.

"Oh I don't know", I said a little defensively. "It seems to work well enough for me."

"Hmm. Well it doesn't work for me. What for instance has the opening bit—even aside from its puerile tone—got to do with the rest of the story?—is trying to be a damn sight too clever if you ask me."

My hand shook as I held a match to a fresh cigarette. I appeared to consider what my friend had just said.

"What's more, why is he bothering with Tolstoy? Isn't that a bit pretentious? At best he's merely using a loose framework on which to hang anything that comes into his head. As for any significance the story pretends to have . . ." He shrugged humorously. " . . . All I can say about that is that if I didn't know—better I'd say he was having a bit of a game."

I rose at this, averting my face to conceal the angry red burns that had flamed in my cheeks. I stared at the ornament my friend had brought back from his travels: a black elephant whose trunk had been lopped off. I was tring to control my voice.

"But that's the point isn't it? The story COULD be anything, because there's nothing to hold it down." I inhaled, watching the smoke trickle through my mouth. "You see, at some mysterious point a story CHOOSES its particular development. But why that development rather than any other? Why development at all, when it can't even begin to make a choice?" I faltered, stubbing my cigarette out in the ash-tray.

"Why, my dear fellow, you do seem angry. We both know that - will never make a writer. Oh I know", said he, raising a hand to forestall the retort that burned at my lips, "I know what you're going to say. That we have no grounds on which to make such a judgement. But—hang it all!—we're educated fellows. Surely we know the difference

between good writing and bad. Between writing that COUNTS and writing that is . . . well, to put it frankly . . . "

"Oh God!" I cried. "What IS a writer anyway? What does he look like? Does he have hair in his nose? For heaven's sake, let's not be smug about this "sacred act" of writing. You're too late anyway", I went on more calmly, with an air perhaps of regret. "All that's in the past."

I broke off, staring out of the window. My eyes were wet. It took me some moments to grasp the full implications of the extraordinary scene that confronted me. My hands gripped in my trouser packets.

"Well, let's forget about it", I then murmured. "How about some coffee?" I faced my scowling friend. A faint smile tugged at his lips.

"All right." He shrugged. "But don't think you can get out of it that way", he added with a wink.

"No. I don't suppose I can". said I.

THE MOVE

The time is very important. It is twenty eight minutes before nine a.m. The polished mahogany case of the clock is decorated with a flourishing goblet of fruit, and the black hands of the clock-face are fixed obsessively at twenty eight minutes before nine a.m. inside the gold circle, though really it is only gold plated. Nonetheless it is very fine. The floating gold of an apple forms the aesthetic centre of the arrangement, between two falling pears; a peach seems to hover in the background--an indifferent suggestion. It is difficult to know because the fruit's colouring is uniform--a dusty gold. The clock cost us fifty dollars and is therefore--you may gather the inevitable implication--our dearest possession. Oh, for that matter, a singing oasis against the creeping aridity of our lives. Indeed, this is not inconsistent with the fact that it has never, no not once--my emphasis, as you may suspect, has a purpose--indicated to us the correct time.

It was twenty eight minutes before nine a.m.

While my wife. (It is necessary for me to designate her thus, because what I have in mind for her--a sort of

suffocating intimacy, a sort of anonymity, a sort of palpitating caesura--may be hugged by this term "my wife".) While my wife was painting her face. (Painting? I know, I know. The word is a little strong. It hurls, it leaps, and I am only a passive spectator at the games. Painting? The brush's itch to deflower the canvas. The mask. Should I be discreet--conceal my intention from the hot aroused attention of the reader? I should substitute "making up"--Oh but the sycophantic irony! Then, "applying her make-up". And should I then specify the specifics of this operation? Or would it create an entirely new effect that had not entered my calculations?)

No matter.

While my wife was painting her face, I paused (in another room), closely observing the objective look she wore, pushing up one side of her face and stretching the skin like a stocking. Or like the soiled tablecloth, where the clock stands, ruffled up into welts. It was a little before nine a.m. I suffered a bowel movement which choked me with--a gutter's matted refuse, a snake gobbling a rabbit, a weir plastered with decayed branches, rotted leaves, butts, bottles, bloated masks of condoms. What is more--

I held a knife in one hand, and I was shutting myself up

like an animal in fear (picture a cat's corkscrew of fur in anticipation of the pounce or flight), while my wife prohibited the bathroom with emasculating flicks of a mascara brush. And my face protruded its tongue.

Frustration. Resentment. A decided debauchery of expression, no doubt appropriate to the repressed state. Hm. The psychological complex may not so far exceed the limit of control. A hint of the subordination of the objective world to the subjective vision, its powerlessness under the twisting stiletto heel of subjectivism, might not go amiss.

I looked out of the window. Rain bubbled out of the sky in thick drops like melted fat.

The repressed emotional state projected onto the huge screen of the sky. And what may not be painted upon that astonishing blankness?

I heard the toilet flush and I was cold, convulsed by a fit of shivering; my skin crackled. I sat down, my hands bulging on my knees, my flesh cold and rubbery. I tried to think, but my mind was of the same cold, rubbery stuff, like the North Sea.

The sensuous balance is correct. He is 'frozen by his

helplessness', plunged into the cold bath of his unredeemed body. Yet still able to find analogies in the music of the physical world--"like the North Sea".

When I had finished eating, I sat back, lit a cigarette, murmured to her. I said how glad I was to be leaving and she said "Yes", still eating, while I observed the dark, animal mat of hair that seemed stuck to her head. She said she was late, and went into the bathroom, asking Did I have the list of things to do today? I piled up the dishes in the deep, old-fashioned sink and when the boiling water exploded across the back of my hands I whispered, "Please, please go". The soapy water crawled up my hands like an avalanche, my hands bore into the spongy mass, and I raised a finger to my mouth knowingly.

Calculated disruption of time. 'Time' is the compelling narrative medium for the twentieth century writer (See: somewhere in Lukacs). Time is drama, decay, the human in us. Time is our ally because it is also our great enemy, and aphorisms come easier than plot.

Sun splashed white paint over the street. I walked towards the house. White with black shutters. Seared me.

I was about to press the bell when the door opened. A girl in a white maid's cap silently ushered me in; a mat of fur clung to her arms. She led me into the room, where people started to laugh. Mouths torn open into white huge ellipses in shadowy heads. I looked down, and was naked.

A dream.

When I awoke, no hint of an end in the things which my eyes saw. I rose, understanding this was to be our last day, and I was glad. Whistled softly as the yellow eggs hissed in the pan. Called my wife in to breakfast, and smiled into her flushed face. Ate quickly. Crushing the food in my mouth, and leaned back, my hand unconsciously twisting a fork, and inhaled the cigarette deeply. But she refused me, said she didn't have the time, she was late. I was at the sink when the cramp pinched my body like a crab. I said, "Yes, smiled painfully", and smiled at myself for saying it, but I couldn't stop it being a painful smile.

I looked out of the window.

I was trying to remember what I had to do, and I walked over to the bathroom and asked, "Do you remember what I have to do?" I crushed the photographs against the back of the drawer: a year grinning through the slit mouths and shut, animal teeth. They were very good; some over-exposed.

In these last, the images were half-erased and had the waxy, blanched surface of a discarded doll.

Narrative tone important in above passage, secreting the dead, waxy quality of deep hurt. I need hardly point out that the "over-exposed" photographs distinctly recall the dream--a peculiar crick of style, signifying the author's awareness that the reader, lest he receive occasional prodding, is liable to forget earlier features. How much literary style has to do with the reader's 'bad memory' is a point worth pursuing.

One thing I must do is buy a curtain rod, when I tried I was told they didn't stock the kind I wanted, I should try at -- which is more likely to have them, I'm sorry but we have the adjustable kind as you may see, now everyone buys this kind, Oh Christ this pain or acute discomfort, it's ridiculous and you see I am smiling, but why doesn't she go.

I went into the kitchen, up to the sink with juggling hands; water swelled like a sponge. It was warm, I had painted these walls red, red as the inside of my mouth when I open it as I am doing now, my head creased into my neck, shouting ugh ugh ugh. I let the water envelop my hands, it is like brushing my fingers against the velvet insides of her thighs.

And I drag up a plate, tracing my fingers through its silky film like insect wings, and let it fall against silence. And again my hands prod, but now they are touched by a slick of fat, and make two holes in the scum, I look at them remembering the winter.

Groucho Marx grins like a brazier: chestnuts under cold nights. To touch upon a theory I have about the meaning of their comedy: depends on absurdity, to wit primacy of the inconsequential, digression turned theme, surprising juxtapositions.

I'll tell you about that winter. We resisted: that's what it comes down to, resistence. We screwed up. In spring the buds bloomed like flies, bled blossom. Outside the apartment when the snow melted, its bowels left a graveyard of dog shit. Last night it was hot and I didn't know what to do with myself.

Rupture of tone. Kitchen suggests womb, female; cruel and robust winter catalyst for the maleness still left to this emasculated young man. Language now 'assumed' as against the subliminal, repressed, or female language which up till now has prevailed.

I shivered. It was cold. Sky like an old newspaper. Rain softly pelting the window panes. Sun like raw meat in the sky.

The Move had come. We waited all year. It had come. The door banged shut. Tap dripped in the sink, flowering stains. The sky a sea of leaping dolphins. From somewhere the whimsical lilt of Cole Porter, the smash hit, the cynical heart of sentiment. "Just One of those Things".

Each night I hear a madman cry.

"A trip to the moon on gossamer wings".

Jabbing pain. Constipated. Ship wallowing in a foul wind.

At dawn he cries, as if he had wound himself up, "Oh Lordy". Cats in the night, all the inexpressible loneliness and fright.

I feel it is only a mouth that yells. No face, no history. A mouth that yells.

"It was just one of those things".

Ship. Wallow. Foul wind. All confused.

Now she is saying goodbye. I listen to myself say, "See you", the muscles tight around my mouth.

Beginnings and ends. Life swollen with empty clauses. The door shuts. The footsteps walk away. My face unsmiles itself, removes the pins. The sun through the window is shining like a playground.

I raised the knife and stuck it into my hand. There was a

red froth over the unwashed dishes.

If language is an aged whore who must draw customers with whatever seedy charms are left to her disposal, then it must seize the shocking, the exclamatory. And still language pusues the lights like an aged Scarlet O' Hara, and when will a new wind blow? There's a good show on television this evening.

I let my body sink into a chair but resisted it and it bunched. I reached into a pocket and fumbled among the pennies, matches, shreds, finally achieving the object of my grope--a scrap of paper on which the pencilled words, "Forgetfulness is just the rules of the game", sprawled.

I remembered. When the landlady showed us the rooms. And told us about her mother who lived over the way. She said, "Don't mind if she comes to the window with nothing on. She's a bit queer."

My head rocked on my breast, rain splashed. "This is it", she said, two red worms protruding from her breasts. I'm sorry but we have the adjustable kind as you may see. Now everyone buys this kind. The door banged shut. Banged shut. My hands melted like fat on my naked body, when she came out of the bathroom and said, "Finished".

Awake. I heard his whimper in the night. Five a.m. The dark pressed against me like an animal. She, hunched in her separate darkness.

I awoke and rose softly, timid of waking her, and made coffee, as I have done each day of our year. My feet cold on the polished floor, I listen to the whisper of my feet. She was sleeping still when I arose from our bed in one movement.

His cries woke me at five a.m. I heard my nails scratch at the glass. Sleep did not exist any more. I reached into the huddled dark at my side, brushing it with cold fingertips.

I'll never get used to it. If she leaves me I'll never get used to it. I watch my whispering mouth in the bathroom mirror.

It was precisely twenty eight minutes before nine a.m. when my wife left me.

Declensions

MOVE: Move away from; move towards --

MOVE: As in a game. The movement of a piece exerts a

strategy. One move may utterly make over a game. In most games, an attempt is made to conceal the strategy from the opponent; if the strategy is discontinuous or confused, the player may also attempt to conceal this fact from his opponent.

REMOVE: Take away from, make absent. So that what occupied a certain time and place (often functioning as if these were its natural habitat) are uprooted, or forgotten. In time, even the quality of an 'absence' may disappear.

REMOVE: For instance, at one remove from. One might thus characterise the relationship between an ironic author and his work.

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