

English 257
The Short Story

Supplemental Readings

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for the dustoff. After we'd secured an LZ, Dave Jensen went over and kneeled at Strunk's side. The stump had stopped twitching now. For a time there was some question as to whether Strunk was still alive, but then he opened his eyes and looked up at Dave Jensen. "Oh, Jesus," he said, and moaned, and tried to slide away and said, "Jesus, man, don't kill me."

"Relax," Jensen said.

Lee Strunk seemed groggy and confused. He lay still for a second and then motioned toward his leg. "Really, it's not so bad. Not terrible. Hey, *really* — they can sew it back on — *really*."

"Right, I'll bet they can."

"You think?"

"Sure I do."

Strunk frowned at the sky. He passed out again, then woke up and said, "Don't kill me."

"I won't," Jensen said.

"I'm *serious*."

"Sure."

"But you got to promise. Swear it to me — swear you won't kill me."

Jensen nodded and said, "I swear," and then a little later we carried Strunk to the dustoff chopper. Jensen reached out and touched the good leg. "Go on now," he said. Later we heard that Strunk died somewhere over Chu Lai, which seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight.

HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY

Author: Tim O'Brien

Title: The Things They Carried

Publisher: Broadway Books

Place: New York

Year: 1990

THIS IS TRUE.

I had a buddy in Vietnam. His name was Bob Kiley, but everybody called him Rat.

A friend of his gets killed, so about a week later Rat sits down and writes a letter to the guy's sister. Rat tells her what a great brother she had, how together the guy was, a number one pal and comrade. A real soldier's soldier, Rat says. Then he tells a few stories to make the point, how her brother would always volunteer for stuff nobody else would volunteer for in a million years, dangerous stuff, like doing recon or going out on these really badass night patrols. Stainless steel balls, Rat tells her. The guy was a little crazy, for sure, but crazy in a good way, a real daredevil, because he liked the challenge of it, he liked testing himself, just man against gook. A great, great guy, Rat says.

Anyway, it's a terrific letter, very personal and touching. Rat almost bawls writing it. He gets all teary telling about the good times they had together, how her brother made the war seem almost fun, always raising hell and lighting up villes and bringing smoke to bear every which way. A great sense of humor, too. Like the time at this river when he went fishing with a whole damn crate of hand grenades. Probably

the funniest thing in world history, Rat says, all that gore, about twenty zillion dead gook fish. Her brother, he had the right attitude. He knew how to have a good time. On Halloween, this real hot spooky night, the dude paints up his body all different colors and puts on this weird mask and hikes over to a ville and goes trick-or-treating almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16. A tremendous human being, Rat says. Pretty nutso sometimes, but you could trust him with your life.

And then the letter gets very sad and serious. Rat pours his heart out. He says he loved the guy. He says the guy was his best friend in the world. They were like soul mates, he says, like twins or something, they had a whole lot in common. He tells the guy's sister he'll look her up when the war's over.

So what happens?

Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back.

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil. Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze. Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old — it's too much for him — so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says *cooze*, because his friend is dead,

and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back.

You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for the truth; if you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty.

Listen to Rat: "Jesus Christ, man, I write this beautiful fuckin' letter, I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back."

The dead guy's name was Curt Lemon. What happened was, we crossed a muddy river and marched west into the mountains, and on the third day we took a break along a trail junction in deep jungle. Right away, Lemon and Rat Kiley started goofing. They didn't understand about the spookiness. They were kids; they just didn't know. A nature hike, they thought, not even a war, so they went off into the shade of some giant trees — quadruple canopy, no sunlight at all — and they were giggling and calling each other yellow mother and playing a silly game they'd invented. The game involved smoke grenades, which were harmless unless you did stupid things, and what they did was pull out the pin and stand a few feet apart and play catch under the shade of those huge trees. Whoever chickened out was a yellow mother. And if nobody chickened out, the grenade would make a light popping sound and they'd be covered with smoke and they'd laugh and dance around and then do it again.

It's all exactly true.

It happened, to *me*, nearly twenty years ago, and I still remember that trail junction and those giant trees and a soft dripping sound somewhere beyond the trees. I remember the smell of moss. Up in the canopy there were tiny white blossoms, but no sunlight at all, and I remember the shad-

ows spreading out under the trees where Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley were playing catch with smoke grenades. Mitchell Sanders sat flipping his yo-yo. Norman Bowker and Kiowa and Dave Jensen were dozing, or half dozing, and all around us were those ragged green mountains.

Except for the laughter things were quiet.

At one point, I remember, Mitchell Sanders turned and looked at me, not quite nodding, as if to warn me about something, as if he already *knew*, then after a while he rolled up his yo-yo and moved away.

It's hard to tell you what happened next.

They were just goofing. There was a noise, I suppose, which must've been the detonator, so I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight. His face was suddenly brown and shining. A handsome kid, really. Sharp gray eyes, lean and narrow-waisted, and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms.

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Curt Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*.

* * *

In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It's a question of credibility. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn't, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.

In other cases you can't even tell a true war story. Sometimes it's just beyond telling.

I heard this one, for example, from Mitchell Sanders. It was near dusk and we were sitting at my foxhole along a wide muddy river north of Quang Ngai. I remember how peaceful the twilight was. A deep pinkish red spilled out on the river, which moved without sound, and in the morning we would cross the river and march west into the mountains. The occasion was right for a good story.

"God's truth," Mitchell Sanders said. "A six-man patrol goes up into the mountains on a basic listening-post operation. The idea's to spend a week up there, just lie low and listen for enemy movement. They've got a radio along, so if they hear anything suspicious — anything — they're supposed to call in artillery or gunships, whatever it takes. Otherwise they keep strict field discipline. Absolute silence. They just listen."

Sanders glanced at me to make sure I had the scenario. He was playing with his yo-yo, dancing it with short, tight little strokes of the wrist.

His face was blank in the dusk.

"We're talking regulation, by-the-book LP. These six guys, they don't say boo for a solid week. They don't got tongues. *All ears.*"

"Right," I said.

"Understand me?"

"Invisible."

Sanders nodded.

"Affirm," he said. "Invisible. So what happens is, these

guys get themselves deep in the bush, all camouflaged up, and they lie down and wait and that's all they do, nothing else, they lie there for seven straight days and just listen. And man, I'll tell you — it's spooky. This is mountains. You don't *know* spooky till you been there. Jungle, sort of, except it's way up in the clouds and there's always this fog — like rain, except it's not raining — everything's all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can't see jack, you can't find your own pecker to piss with. Like you don't even have a body. Serious spooky. You just go with the vapors — the fog sort of takes you in . . . And the sounds, man. The sounds carry forever. You hear stuff nobody should *ever* hear."

Sanders was quiet for a second, just working the yo-yo, then he smiled at me.

"So after a couple days the guys start hearing this real soft, kind of wacked-out music. Weird echoes and stuff. Like a radio or something, but it's not a radio, it's this strange gook music that comes right out of the rocks. Faraway, sort of, but right up close, too. They try to ignore it. But it's a listening post, right? So they listen. And every night they keep hearing that crazyass gook concert. All kinds of chimes and xylophones. I mean, this is wilderness — no way, it can't be real — but there it *is*, like the mountains are tuned in to Radio fucking Hanoi. Naturally they get nervous. One guy sticks Juicy Fruit in his ears. Another guy almost flips. Thing is, though, they can't report music. They can't get on the horn and call back to base and say, 'Hey, listen, we need some firepower, we got to blow away this weirdo gook rock band.' They can't do that. It wouldn't go down. So they lie there in the fog and keep their mouths shut. And what makes it extra bad, see, is the poor dudes can't horse around like normal. Can't joke it away. Can't even talk to each other except maybe in whispers, all hush-hush, and that just revs up the willies. All they do is listen."

Again there was some silence as Mitchell Sanders looked out on the river. The dark was coming on hard now, and off to the west I could see the mountains rising in silhouette, all the mysteries and unknowns.

"This next part," Sanders said quietly, "you won't believe."

"Probably not," I said.

"You won't. And you know why?" He gave me a long, tired smile. "Because it happened. Because every word is absolutely dead-on true."

Sanders made a sound in his throat, like a sigh, as if to say he didn't care if I believed him or not. But he did care. He wanted me to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling. He seemed sad, in a way.

"These six guys," he said, "they're pretty fried out by now, and one night they start hearing voices. Like at a cocktail party. That's what it sounds like, this big swank gook cocktail party somewhere out there in the fog. Music and chitchat and stuff. It's crazy, I know, but they hear the champagne corks. They hear the actual martini glasses. Real hoity-toity, all very civilized, except this isn't civilization. This is Nam.

"Anyway, the guys try to be cool. They just lie there and groove, but after a while they start hearing — you won't believe this — they hear chamber music. They hear violins and cellos. They hear this terrific mama-san soprano. Then after a while they hear gook opera and a glee club and the Haiphong Boys Choir and a barbershop quartet and all kinds of weird chanting and Buddha-Buddha stuff. And the whole time, in the background, there's still that cocktail party going on. All these different voices. Not human voices, though. Because it's the mountains. Follow me? The rock — it's *talking*. And the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses. Everything talks. The trees talk politics, the

monkeys talk religion. The whole country. Vietnam. The place talks. It talks. Understand? Nam — it truly *talks*.

“The guys can’t cope. They lose it. They get on the radio and report enemy movement — a whole army, they say — and they order up the firepower. They get arty and gunships. They call in air strikes. And I’ll tell you, they fuckin’ crash that cocktail party. All night long, they just smoke those mountains. They make jungle juice. They blow away trees and glee clubs and whatever else there is to blow away. Scorch time. They walk napalm up and down the ridges. They bring in the Cobras and F-4s, they use Willie Peter and HE and incendiaries. It’s all fire. They make those mountains burn.

“Around dawn things finally get quiet. Like you never even *heard* quiet before. One of those real thick, real misty days — just clouds and fog, they’re off in this special zone — and the mountains are absolutely dead-flat silent. Like Brigadoon — pure vapor, you know? Everything’s all sucked up inside the fog. Not a single sound, except they still *hear* it.

“So they pack up and start humping. They head down the mountain, back to base camp, and when they get there they don’t say diddy. They don’t talk. Not a word, like they’re deaf and dumb. Later on this fat bird colonel comes up and asks what the hell happened out there. What’d they hear? Why all the ordnance? The man’s ragged out, he gets down tight on their case. I mean, they spent six trillion dollars on firepower, and this fatass colonel wants answers, he wants to know what the fuckin’ story is.

“But the guys don’t say zip. They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can’t ever say. It says, man, you got *wax* in your ears. It says, poor bas-

tard, you’ll never know — wrong frequency — you don’t *even* want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away, because certain stories you don’t ever tell.”

You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever. Not when Mitchell Sanders stood up and moved off into the dark.

It all happened.

Even now, at this instant, I remember that yo-yo. In a way, I suppose, you had to be there, you had to hear it, but I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him, his frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth.

And I remember sitting at my foxhole that night, watching the shadows of Quang Ngai, thinking about the coming day and how we would cross the river and march west into the mountains, all the ways I might die, all the things I did not understand.

Late in the night Mitchell Sanders touched my shoulder.

“Just came to me,” he whispered. “The moral, I mean. Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin’. Like that fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. Everybody’s sweet little virgin girlfriend. What they need is to go out on LP. The vapors, man. Trees and rocks — you got to *listen* to your enemy.”

And then again, in the morning, Sanders came up to me. The platoon was preparing to move out, checking weapons, going through all the little rituals that preceded a day’s march. Already the lead squad had crossed the river and was filing off toward the west.

“I got a confession to make,” Sanders said. “Last night, man, I had to make up a few things.”

"I know that."

"The glee club. There wasn't any glee club."

"Right."

"No opera."

"Forget it, I understand."

"Yeah, but listen, it's still true. Those six guys, they heard wicked sound out there. They heard sound you just plain won't believe."

Sanders pulled on his rucksack, closed his eyes for a moment, then almost smiled at me. I knew what was coming.

"All right," I said, "what's the moral?"

"Forget it."

"No, go ahead."

For a long while he was quiet, looking away, and the silence kept stretching out until it was almost embarrassing. Then he shrugged and gave me a stare that lasted all day.

"Hear that quiet, man?" he said. "That quiet — just listen. There's your moral."

In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe "Oh."

True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis.

For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside.

It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.

* * *

This one does it for me. I've told it before — many times, many versions — but here's what actually happened.

We crossed that river and marched west into the mountains. On the third day, Curt Lemon stepped on a booby-trapped 105 round. He was playing catch with Rat Kiley, laughing, and then he was dead. The trees were thick; it took nearly an hour to cut an LZ for the dustoff.

Later, higher in the mountains, we came across a baby VC water buffalo. What it was doing there I don't know — no farms or paddies — but we chased it down and got a rope around it and led it along to a deserted village where we set up for the night. After supper Rat Kiley went over and stroked its nose.

He opened up a can of C rations, pork and beans, but the baby buffalo wasn't interested.

Rat shrugged.

He stepped back and shot it through the right front knee. The animal did not make a sound. It went down hard, then got up again, and Rat took careful aim and shot off an ear. He shot it in the hindquarters and in the little hump at its back. He shot it twice in the flanks. It wasn't to kill; it was to hurt. He put the rifle muzzle up against the mouth and shot the mouth away. Nobody said much. The whole platoon stood there watching, feeling all kinds of things, but there wasn't a great deal of pity for the baby water buffalo. Curt Lemon was dead. Rat Kiley had lost his best friend in the world. Later in the week he would write a long personal letter to the guy's sister, who would not write back, but for now it was a question of pain. He shot off the tail. He shot away chunks of meat below the ribs. All around us there was the smell of smoke and filth and deep greenery, and the evening was humid and very hot. Rat went to automatic. He shot randomly, almost casually, quick little spurts in the belly

and butt. Then he reloaded, squatted down, and shot it in the left front knee. Again the animal fell hard and tried to get up, but this time it couldn't quite make it. It wobbled and went down sideways. Rat shot it in the nose. He bent forward and whispered something, as if talking to a pet, then he shot it in the throat. All the while the baby buffalo was silent, or almost silent, just a light bubbling sound where the nose had been. It lay very still. Nothing moved except the eyes, which were enormous, the pupils shiny black and dumb.

Rat Kiley was crying. He tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself.

The rest of us stood in a ragged circle around the baby buffalo. For a time no one spoke. We had witnessed something essential, something brand-new and profound, a piece of the world so startling there was not yet a name for it.

Somebody kicked the baby buffalo.

It was still alive, though just barely, just in the eyes.

"Amazing," Dave Jensen said. "My whole life, I never seen anything like it."

"Never?"

"Not hardly. Not once."

Kiowa and Mitchell Sanders picked up the baby buffalo. They hauled it across the open square, hoisted it up, and dumped it in the village well.

Afterward, we sat waiting for Rat to get himself together.

"Amazing," Dave Jensen kept saying. "A new wrinkle. I never seen it before."

Mitchell Sanders took out his yo-yo. "Well, that's Nam," he said. "Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's real fresh and original."

How do you generalize?

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also

mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead.

The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purple orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference — a powerful, implacable beauty — and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.

To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life. After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil — everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self — your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you

want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness. Though it's odd, you're never more alive than when you're almost dead. You recognize what's valuable. Freshly, as if for the first time, you love what's best in yourself and in the world, all that might be lost. At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond, and although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not.

The Fog of War

Mitchell Sanders was right. For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel — the spiritual texture — of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can't tell where you are, or why you're there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.

In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true.

Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again. And then for a long time you lie there watching the story happen in your head. You listen to your

wife's breathing. The war's over. You close your eyes. You smile and think, Christ, what's the *point*?

This one wakes me up.

In the mountains that day, I watched Lemon turn sideways. He laughed and said something to Rat Kiley. Then he took a peculiar half step, moving from shade into bright sunlight, and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there, so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off. I remember the white bone of an arm. I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines. The gore was horrible, and stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jensen singing "Lemon Tree" as we threw down the parts.

You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, "Is it true?" and if the answer matters, you've got your answer.

For example, we've all heard this one. Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast and saves his three buddies.

Is it true?

The answer matters.

You'd feel cheated if it never happened. Without the grounding reality, it's just a trite bit of puffery, pure Hollywood, untrue in the way all such stories are untrue. Yet even if it did happen — and maybe it did, anything's possible — even then you know it can't be true, because a true war story does not depend upon that kind of truth. Absolute occurrence is irrelevant. A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. For example: Four guys go down a trail. A grenade sails out. One guy jumps on it and takes the blast, but it's a killer gre-

nade and everybody dies anyway. Before they die, though, one of the dead guys says, "The fuck you do *that* for?" and the jumper says, "Story of my life, man," and the other guy starts to smile but he's dead.

That's a true story that never happened.

Twenty years later, I can still see the sunlight on Lemon's face. I can see him turning, looking back at Rat Kiley, then he laughed and took that curious half step from shade into sunlight, his face suddenly brown and shining, and when his foot touched down, in that instant, he must've thought it was the sunlight that was killing him. It was not the sunlight. It was a rigged 105 round. But if I could ever get the story right, how the sun seemed to gather around him and pick him up and lift him high into a tree, if I could somehow recreate the fatal whiteness of that light, the quick glare, the obvious cause and effect, then you would believe the last thing Curt Lemon believed, which for him must've been the final truth.

Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell.

I won't say it but I'll think it.

I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze.*

Because she wasn't listening.

It wasn't a war story. It was a love story.

But you can't say that. All you can do is tell it one more time, patiently, adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth. No Mitchell Sanders, you tell her. No Lemon, no Rat Kiley. No trail junction. No baby buffalo. No vines or moss or white blossoms. Beginning to end, you tell her, it's all made up. Every goddamn detail — the mountains and the river and especially that poor dumb baby buffalo. None of it happened. *None* of it. And even if it did happen, it didn't happen in the mountains, it happened in this little village on the Batangan Peninsula, and it was raining like crazy, and one night a guy named Stink Harris woke up screaming with a leech on his tongue. You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it.

And in the end, of course, a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight. It's about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen.

everything." Tiny beads of sweat glistened at Kiowa's forehead. His eyes moved from the sky to the dead man's body to the knuckles of his own hands. "So listen, you best pull your shit together. Can't just sit here all day."

Later he said, "Understand?"

Then he said, "Five minutes, Tim. Five more minutes and we're moving out."

The one eye did a funny twinkling trick, red to yellow. His head was wrenched sideways, as if loose at the neck, and the dead young man seemed to be staring at some distant object beyond the bell-shaped flowers along the trail. The blood at the neck had gone to a deep purplish black. Clean fingernails, clean hair — he had been a soldier for only a single day. After his years at the university, the man I killed returned with his new wife to the village of My Khe, where he enlisted as a common rifleman with the 48th Vietcong Battalion. He knew he would die quickly. He knew he would see a flash of light. He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people.

Kiowa covered the body with a poncho.

"Hey, you're looking better," he said. "No doubt about it. All you needed was time — some mental R&R."

Then he said, "Man, I'm sorry."

Then later he said, "Why not talk about it?"

Then he said, "Come on, man, talk."

He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay with one leg bent beneath him, his jaw in his throat, his face neither expressive nor inexpressive. One eye was shut. The other was a star-shaped hole.

"Talk," Kiowa said.

AMBUSH



WHEN SHE WAS nine, my daughter Kathleen asked if I had ever killed anyone. She knew about the war; she knew I'd been a soldier. "You keep writing these war stories," she said, "so I guess you must've killed somebody." It was a difficult moment, but I did what seemed right, which was to say, "Of course not," and then to take her onto my lap and hold her for a while. Someday, I hope, she'll ask again. But here I want to pretend she's a grown-up. I want to tell her exactly what happened, or what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she was absolutely right. This is why I keep writing war stories:

He was a short, slender young man of about twenty. I was afraid of him — afraid of something — and as he passed me on the trail I threw a grenade that exploded at his feet and killed him.

Or to go back:

Shortly after midnight we moved into the ambush site outside My Khe. The whole platoon was there, spread out in the dense brush along the trail, and for five hours nothing at all happened. We were working in two-man teams — one man on guard while the other slept, switching off every

two hours — and I remember it was still dark when Kiowa shook me awake for the final watch. The night was foggy and hot. For the first few moments I felt lost, not sure about directions, groping for my helmet and weapon. I reached out and found three grenades and lined them up in front of me; the pins had already been straightened for quick throwing. And then for maybe half an hour I kneeled there and waited. Very gradually, in tiny slivers, dawn began to break through the fog, and from my position in the brush I could see ten or fifteen meters up the trail. The mosquitoes were fierce. I remember slapping at them, wondering if I should wake up Kiowa and ask for some repellent, then thinking it was a bad idea, then looking up and seeing the young man come out of the fog. He wore black clothing and rubber sandals and a gray ammunition belt. His shoulders were slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side as if listening for something. He seemed at ease. He carried his weapon in one hand, muzzle down, moving without any hurry up the center of the trail. There was no sound at all — none that I can remember. In a way, it seemed, he was part of the morning fog, or my own imagination, but there was also the reality of what was happening in my stomach. I had already pulled the pin on a grenade. I had come up to a crouch. It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty. I crouched and kept my head low. I tried to swallow whatever was rising from my stomach, which tasted like lemonade, something fruity and sour. I was terrified. There were no thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make him go away — just evaporate — and I leaned back and felt my mind go empty and then felt it fill up again. I had already thrown the grenade before telling myself to throw it. The brush was thick and I had to lob it high, not aiming, and I re-

member the grenade seeming to freeze above me for an instant, as if a camera had clicked, and I remember ducking down and holding my breath and seeing little wisps of fog rise from the earth. The grenade bounced once and rolled across the trail. I did not hear it, but there must've been a sound, because the young man dropped his weapon and began to run, just two or three quick steps, then he hesitated, swiveling to his right, and he glanced down at the grenade and tried to cover his head but never did. It occurred to me then that he was about to die. I wanted to warn him. The grenade made a popping noise — not soft but not loud either — not what I'd expected — and there was a puff of dust and smoke — a small white puff — and the young man seemed to jerk upward as if pulled by invisible wires. He fell on his back. His rubber sandals had been blown off. There was no wind. He lay at the center of the trail, his right leg bent beneath him, his one eye shut, his other eye a huge star-shaped hole.

It was not a matter of live or die. There was no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed by. And it will always be that way.

Later, I remember, Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would've died anyway. He told me that it was a good kill, that I was a soldier and this was a war, that I should shape up and stop staring and ask myself what the dead man would've done if things were reversed.

None of it mattered. The words seemed far too complicated. All I could do was gape at the fact of the young man's body.

Even now I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting alone in a room, I'll look up

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and see the young man coming out of the morning fog. I'll watch him walk toward me, his shoulders slightly stooped, his head cocked to the side, and he'll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog.

STYLE



GOOD FORM



IT'S TIME TO be blunt.

I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer now, and a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai Province as a foot soldier.

Almost everything else is invented.

But it's not a game. It's a form. Right here, now, as I invent myself, I'm thinking of all I want to tell you about why this book is written as it is. For instance, I want to tell you this: twenty years ago I watched a man die on a trail near the village of My Khe. I did not kill him. But I was present, you see, and my presence was guilt enough. I remember his face, which was not a pretty face, because his jaw was in his throat, and I remember feeling the burden of responsibility and grief. I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present.

But listen. Even *that* story is made up.

I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.

Here is the happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look. And now, twenty years later, I'm left with faceless responsibility and faceless grief.

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.

I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again.

"Daddy, tell the truth," Kathleen can say, "did you ever kill anybody?" And I can say, honestly, "Of course not."

Or I can say, honestly, "Yes."

FIELD TRIP



CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. FIRST RESPONSE. Discuss the story's final lines. What is the "issue" that is "decided"?
2. Though there is little description of the setting in this story, how do the few details that are provided help to establish the tone?
3. How do small actions take on larger significance in the story? Consider the woman picking up the baby's picture and the knocked-down flowerpot.
4. Why is this couple splitting up? Do we know? Does it matter? Explain your response.
5. Discuss the title of the story. The original title was "Mine." Which do you think is more effective?
6. What is the conflict? How is it resolved?
7. Read I Kings 3 in the Bible for the story of Solomon. How might "Popular Mechanics" be read as a retelling of this story? What significant differences do you find in the endings of each?
8. Explain how Carver uses irony to convey theme.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. Compare Carver's style with Ernest Hemingway's in "Soldier's Home" (p. 145).
2. How is the ending of "Popular Mechanics" similar to the ending of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (p. 329)?

PERSPECTIVE

JOHN BARTH (b. 1930)

On Minimalist Fiction

1987

Minimalism (of one sort or another) is the principle (one of the principles, anyhow) underlying (what I and many another interested observer consider to be perhaps) the most impressive phenomenon on the current (North American, especially the United States) literary scene (the gringo equivalent of *el boom* in the Latin American novel): I mean the new flowering of the (North) American short story (in particular the kind of terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced fiction associated in the last five or ten years with such excellent writers as Frederick Barthelme, Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, Bobbie Ann Mason, James Robison, Mary Robison, and Tobias Wolff, and both praised and damned under such labels as "K-Mart realism," "hick chic," "Diet-Pepsi minimalism" and "post-Vietnam, post-literary, postmodernist blue-collar neo-early-Hemingwayism"). . . .

The genre of the short story, as Poe distinguished it from the traditional tale in his 1842 review of Hawthorne's first collection of stories, is an early manifesto of modern narrative minimalism: "In the whole composition there should be no words written, of which the tendency . . . is not to the pre-established

design. . . . Undue length is . . . to be avoided." Poe's codification informs such later nineteenth-century masters of terseness, selectivity, and implicitness (as opposed to leisurely once-upon-a-timelessness, luxuriant abundance, explicit and extended analysis) as Guy de Maupassant and Anton Chekhov. Show, don't tell, said Henry James in effect and at length in his prefaces to the 1908 New York edition of his novels. And don't tell a word more than you absolutely need to, added young Ernest Hemingway, who thus described his "new theory" in the early 1920's: "You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted, and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood. . . ."

Old or new, fiction can be minimalist in any or all of several ways. There are minimalisms of unit, form, and scale: short words, short sentences and paragraphs, [and] super-short stories. . . . There are minimalisms of style: a stripped-down vocabulary; a stripped-down syntax that avoids periodic sentences, serial predications, and complex subordinating constructions; a stripped-down rhetoric that may eschew figurative language altogether; a stripped-down, non-emotive tone. And there are minimalisms of material: minimal characters, minimal exposition ("all that David Copperfield kind of crap," says J. D. Salinger's catcher in the rye), minimal *mises en scène*, minimal action, minimal plot.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR

1. To what extent do Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" and Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics" exemplify minimalist fiction?
2. Write an essay explaining how Carver's "Popular Mechanics" differs from Hawthorne, Flannery O'Connor, and Raymond Carver's minimalist story.

T. CORAGHEGAN BOYLE (b. 1948) "Carnal Knowledge"

Born in Peekskill, New York, T. Coraghegan Boyle earned a doctorate at the University of Iowa and has taught at the University of Southern California. Among his literary awards is a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship and the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. His fiction has appeared in a variety of periodicals including the *North American Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Playboy*. His novels include *Water Music* (1981), *Budding Projects* (1984), *World's End* (1987), *East Is East* (1990), and *The Road to Wellville* (1993), recently made into a film. His short stories are collected in *Descent of Man* (1979), *Greasy Lake and Other Stories* (1985), *If the River Was Whiskey* (1989), and *Without a Hero and Other Stories* (1994), from which "Carnal Knowledge," a story characteristic of Boyle's ironic humor, is reprinted.

I'd never really thought much about meat. It was there in the supermarket in a plastic wrapper; it came between slices of bread with mayo and mustard and a dill pickle on the side; it sputtered and smoked on the grill till somebody flipped it over, and then it appeared on the plate, between the baked potato and the julienne carrots, neatly cross-hatched and floating in a puddle of red juice. Beef, mutton, pork, venison, dripping burgers, and greasy ribs — it was all the same to me, food, the body's fuel, something to savor a moment on the tongue before the digestive system went to work on it. Which is not to say I was totally unconscious of the deeper implications. Every once in a while I'd eat at home, a quartered chicken, a package of Shake 'n Bake, Stove Top stuffing, and frozen peas, and as I hacked away at the stippled yellow skin and pink flesh of the sanitized bird I'd wonder at the darkish bits of organ clinging to the ribs — what was that, liver? kidney? — but in the end it didn't make me any less fond of Kentucky Fried or Chicken McNuggets. I saw those ads in the magazines, too, the ones that showed the veal calves penned up in their own waste, their limbs atrophied and their veins so pumped full of antibiotics they couldn't control their bowels, but when I took a date to Anna Maria's, I could never resist the veal scallopini.

And then I met Alena Jorgensen.

It was a year ago, two weeks before Thanksgiving — I remember the date because it was my birthday, my thirtieth, and I'd called in sick and gone to the beach to warm my face, read a book, and feel a little sorry for myself. The Santa Anas were blowing and it was clear all the way to Catalina, but there was an edge to the air, a scent of winter hanging over Utah, and as far as I could see in either direction I had the beach pretty much to myself. I found a sheltered spot in a tumble of boulders, spread a blanket, and settled down to attack the pastrami on rye I'd brought along for nourishment. Then I turned to my book — a comfortingly apocalyptic tract about the demise of the planet — and let the sun warm me as I read about the denuding of the rain forest, the poisoning of the atmosphere, and the swift silent eradication of species. Gulls coasted by overhead. I saw the distant glint of jetliners.

I must have dozed, my head thrown back, the book spread open in my lap, because the next thing I remember, a strange dog was hovering over me and the sun had dipped behind the rocks. The dog was big, wild-haired, with one staring blue eye, and it just looked at me, ears slightly cocked, as if it expected a Milk-Bone or something. I was startled — not that I don't like dogs, but here was this woolly thing poking its snout in my face — and I guess that I must have made some sort of defensive gesture, because the dog staggered back a step and froze. Even in the confusion of the moment I could see that there was something wrong with this dog, an unsteadiness, a gimp, a wobble to its legs. I felt a mixture of pity and revulsion — had it been hit by a car, was that it? — when all at once I became aware of a wetness on the breast of my windbreaker, and an unmistakable odor rose to my nostrils: I'd been pissed on.

Pissed on. As I lay there unsuspecting, enjoying the sun, the beach, the solitude, this stupid beast had lifted its leg and used me as a pissoir — and now it was poised there on the edge of the blanket as if it expected a reward. A sudden rage seized me. I came up off the blanket with a curse, and it was only then that a dim apprehension seemed to seep into the dog's other eye, the brown one,

and it lurched back and fell on its face, just out of reach. And then it lurched and fell again, bobbing and weaving across the sand like a seal out of water. I was on my feet now, murderous, glad to see that the thing was hobbled — it would simplify the task of running it down and beating it to death.

"Alf!" a voice called, and as the dog floundered in the sand, I turned and saw Alena Jorgensen poised on the boulder behind me. I don't want to make too much of the moment, don't want to mythologize it or clutter the scene with allusions to Aphrodite rising from the waves or accepting the golden apple from Paris, but she was a pretty impressive sight. Bare-legged, fluid, as tall and uncompromising as her Nordic ancestors, and dressed in a Gore-Tex bikini and hooded sweatshirt unzipped to the waist, she blew me away, in any event. Piss-spattered and stupified, I could only gape up at her.

"You bad boy," she said, scolding, "you get out of there." She glanced from the dog to me and back again. "Oh, you bad boy, what have you done?" she demanded, and I was ready to admit to anything, but it was the dog she was addressing, and the dog flopped over in the sand as if it had been shot. Alena skipped lightly down from the rock, and in the next moment, before I could protest, she was rubbing at the stain on my windbreaker with the wadded-up hem of her sweatshirt.

I tried to stop her — "It's all right," I said, "it's nothing," as if dogs routinely pissed on my wardrobe — but she wouldn't hear of it.

"No," she said, rubbing, her hair flying in my face, the naked skin of her thigh pressing unconsciously to my own, "no, this is terrible, I'm so embarrassed — Alf, you bad boy — I'll clean it for you, I will, it's the least — oh, look at that, it's stained right through to your T-shirt —"

I could smell her, the mousse she used in her hair, a lilac soap or perfume, the salt-sweet odor of her sweat — she'd been jogging, that was it. I murmured something about taking it to the cleaner's myself.

She stopped rubbing and straightened up. She was my height, maybe even a fraction taller, and her eyes were ever so slightly mismatched, like the dog's: a deep earnest blue in the right iris, shading to sea-green and turquoise in the left. We were so close we might have been dancing. "Tell you what," she said, and her face lit with a smile, "since you're so nice about the whole thing, and most people wouldn't be, even if they knew what poor Alf has been through, why don't you let me wash it for you — and the T-shirt too?"

I was a little disconcerted at this point — I was the one who'd been pissed on, after all — but my anger was gone. I felt weightless, adrift, like a piece of fluff floating on the breeze. "Listen," I said, and for the moment I couldn't look her in the eye, "I don't want to put you to any trouble . . ."

"I'm ten minutes up the beach, and I've got a washer and dryer. Come on, it's no trouble at all. Or do you have plans? I mean, I could just pay for the cleaner's if you want . . ."

I was between relationships — the person I'd been seeing off and on for the past year wouldn't even return my calls — and my plans consisted of taking a solitary late-afternoon movie as a birthday treat, then heading over to my mother's for dinner and the cake with the candles. My Aunt Irene would be there, and so would my grandmother. They would exclaim over how big I was and how handsome and then they would begin to contrast my present self with my previous, more diminutive incarnations, and finally work themselves up to a spate of reminiscence that would continue unabated till my mother

drove them home. And then, if I was lucky, I'd go out to a singles bar and make the acquaintance of a divorced computer programmer in her mid-thirties with three kids and bad breath.

I shrugged. "Plans? No, not really. I mean, nothing in particular."

Alena was housesitting a one-room bungalow that rose stumplike from the sand, no more than fifty feet from the tide line. There were trees in the yard behind it and the place was sandwiched between glass fortresses with crenelated decks, whipping flags, and great hulking concrete pylons. Sitting on the couch inside, you could feel the dull reverberation of each wave hitting the shore, a slow steady pulse that forever defined the place for me. Alena gave me a faded UC Davis sweatshirt that nearly fit, sprayed a stain remover on my T-shirt and windbreaker, and in a single fluid motion flipped down the lid of the washer and extracted two beers from the refrigerator beside it.

There was an awkward moment as she settled into the chair opposite me and we concentrated on our beers. I didn't know what to say. I was disoriented, giddy, still struggling to grasp what had happened. Fifteen minutes earlier I'd been dozing on the beach, alone on my birthday and feeling sorry for myself, and now I was ensconced in a cozy beach house, in the presence of Alena Jorgensen and her naked spill of leg, drinking a beer. "So what do you do?" she said, setting her beer down on the coffee table.

I was grateful for the question, too grateful maybe. I described to her at length how dull my job was, nearly ten years with the same agency, writing ad copy, my brain gone numb with disuse. I was somewhere in the middle of a blow-by-blow account of our current campaign for a Ghanian vodka distilled from calabash husks when she said, "I know what you mean," and told me she'd dropped out of veterinary school herself. "After I saw what they did to the animals. I mean, can you see neutering a dog just for our convenience, just because it's easier for us if they don't have a sex life?" Her voice grew hot. "It's the same old story, species fascism at its worst."

Alf was lying at my feet, grunting softly and looking up mournfully out of his staring blue eye, as blameless a creature as ever lived. I made a small noise of agreement and then focused on Alf. "And your dog," I said, "he's arthritic? Or is it hip dysplasia or what?" I was pleased with myself for the question—aside from "tapeworm," "hip dysplasia" was the only veterinary term I could dredge up from the memory bank, and I could see that Alf's problems ran deeper than worms.

Alena looked angry suddenly. "Don't I wish," she said. She paused to draw a bitter breath. "There's nothing wrong with Alf that wasn't inflicted on him. They tortured him, maimed him, mutilated him."

"Tortured him?" I echoed, feeling the indignation rise in me—this beautiful girl, this innocent beast. "Who?"

Alena leaned forward and there was real hate in her eyes. She mentioned a prominent shoe company—spat out the name, actually. It was an ordinary name, a familiar one, and it hung in the air between us, suddenly sinister. Alf had been part of an experiment to market booties for dogs—suede, cordovan, patent leather, the works. The dogs were made to pace a treadmill in their booties, to assess wear; Alf was part of the control group.

"Control group?" I could feel the hackles rising on the back of my neck.

"They used eighty-grit sandpaper on the treads, to accelerate the process." Alena shot a glance out the window to where the surf pounded the shore; she bit her lip. "Alf was one of the dogs without booties."

I was stunned. I wanted to get up and comfort her, but I might as well have been grafted to the chair. "I don't believe it," I said. "How could anybody—"

"Believe it," she said. She studied me a moment, then set down her beer and crossed the room to dig through a cardboard box in the corner. If I was moved by the emotion she'd called up, I was moved even more by the sight of her bending over the box in her Gore-Tex bikini; I clung to the edge of the chair as if it were a plunging roller coaster. A moment later she dropped a dozen file folders in my lap. The uppermost bore the name of the shoe company, and it was crammed with news clippings, several pages of a diary relating to plant operations and workers' shifts at the Grand Rapids facility, and a floor plan of the laboratories. The folders beneath it were inscribed with the names of cosmetics firms, biomedical research centers, furriers, tanners, meatpackers. Alena perched on the edge of the coffee table and watched as I shuffled through them.

"You know the Draize test?"

I gave her a blank look.

"They inject chemicals into rabbits' eyes to see how much it'll take before they go blind. The rabbits are in cages, thousands of them, and they take a needle and jab it into their eyes—and you know why, you know in the name of what great humanitarian cause this is going on, even as we speak?"

I didn't know. The surf pounded at my feet. I glanced at Alf and then back into her angry eyes.

"Mascara, that's what. Mascara. They torture countless thousands of rabbits so women can look like sluts."

I thought the characterization a bit harsh, but when I studied her pale lashes and tight lipstickless mouth, I saw that she meant it. At any rate, the notion set her off, and she launched into a two-hour lecture, gesturing with her flawless hands, quoting figures, digging through her files for the odd photo of legless mice or morphine-addicted gerbils. She told me how she'd rescued Alf herself, raiding the laboratory with six other members of the Animal Liberation Front, the militant group in honor of which Alf had been named. At first, she'd been content to write letters and carry placards, but now, with the lives of so many animals at stake, she'd turned to more direct action: harassment, vandalism, sabotage. She described how she'd spiked trees with Earth-Firsters in Oregon, cut miles of barbed-wire fence on cattle ranches in Nevada, destroyed records in biomedical research labs up and down the coast and insinuated herself between the hunters and the bighorn sheep in the mountains of Arizona. I could only nod and exclaim, smile ruefully and whistle in a low "holy cow!" sort of way. Finally, she paused to level her unsettling eyes on me. "You know what Isaac Bashevis Singer said?"

We were on our third beer. The sun was gone. I didn't have a clue.

Alena leaned forward. "Every day is Auschwitz for the animals."

I looked down into the amber aperture of my beer bottle and nodded my head sadly. The dryer had stopped an hour and a half ago. I wondered if she'd go out to dinner with me, and what she could eat if she did. "Uh . . . was wondering," I said, "if . . . if you might want to go out for something . . ."

chose that moment to heave himself up from the floor and urinate on the wall behind me. My dinner proposal hung in the balance as Alena shot up off the edge of the table to scold him and then gently usher him out the door. "Poor Alf," she sighed, turning back to me with a shrug. "But listen, I'm sorry if I talked your head off—I didn't mean to, but it's rare to find somebody on your own wavelength."

She smiled. *On your own wavelength*: the words illuminated me, excited me, sent up a tremor I could feel all the way down in the deepest nodes of my reproductive tract. "So how about dinner?" I persisted. Restaurants were running through my head—would it have to be veggie? Could there be even a whiff of grilled flesh on the air? Curdled goat's milk and tabbouleh, tofu, lentil soup, sprouts: *Every day is Auschwitz for the animals*. "No place with meat, of course."

She just looked at me.

"I mean, I don't eat meat myself," I lied, "or actually, not anymore"—since the pastrami sandwich, that is—"but I don't really know any place that . . ." I trailed off lamely.

"I'm a Vegan," she said.

After two hours of blind bunnies, butchered calves and mutilated pups, I couldn't resist the joke. "I'm from Venus myself."

She laughed, but I could see she didn't find it all that funny. Vegans didn't eat meat or fish, she explained, or milk or cheese or eggs, and they didn't wear wool or leather—or fur, of course.

"Of course," I said. We were both standing there, hovering over the coffee table. I was beginning to feel a little foolish.

"Why don't we just eat here," she said.

The deep throb of the ocean seemed to settle in my bones as we lay there in bed that night, Alena and I, and I learned all about the fluency of her limbs and the sweetness of her vegetable tongue. Alf sprawled on the floor beneath us, wheezing and groaning in his sleep, and I blessed him for his incontinence and his doggy stupidity. Something was happening to me—I could feel it in the way the boards shifted under me, feel it with each beat of the surf—and I was ready to go along with it. In the morning, I called in sick again.

Alena was watching me from bed as I dialed the office and described how the flu had migrated from my head to my gut and beyond, and there was a look in her eye that told me I would spend the rest of the day right there beside her, peeling grapes and dropping them one by one between her parted and expectant lips. I was wrong. Half an hour later, after a breakfast of brewer's yeast and what appeared to be some sort of bark marinated in yogurt, I found myself marching up and down the sidewalk in front of a fur emporium in Beverly Hills, waving a placard that read **HOW DOES IT FEEL TO WEAR A CORPSE?** in letters that dripped like blood.

It was a shock. I'd seen protest marches on TV, antiwar rallies and civil rights demonstrations and all that, but I'd never warmed my heels on the pavement or chanted slogans or felt the naked stick in my hand. There were maybe forty of us in all, mostly women, and we waved our placards at passing cars and blocked traffic on the sidewalk. One woman had smeared her face and hands with cold cream steeped in red dye, and Alena had found a ratty mink stole somewhere—the kind that features whole animals sewed together, snout to tail, their miniature limbs dangling—and she'd taken a can of crimson spray

paint to their muzzles so that they looked freshly killed. She brandished this grisly banner on a stick high above her head, whooping like a savage and chanting, "Fur is death, fur is death," over and over again till it became a mantra for the crowd. The day was unseasonably warm, the Jaguars glinted in the sun and the palms nodded in the breeze, and no one, but for a single tight-lipped salesman glowering from behind the store's immaculate windows, paid the slightest bit of attention to us.

I marched out there on the street, feeling exposed and conspicuous, but marching nonetheless—for Alena's sake and for the sake of the foxes and martens and all the rest, and for my own sake too: with each step I took I could feel my consciousness expanding like a balloon, the breath of saintliness seeping steadily into me. Up to this point I'd worn suede and leather like anybody else, ankle boots and Air Jordans, a bombardier jacket I'd had since high school. If I'd drawn the line with fur, it was only because I'd never had any use for it. If I lived in the Yukon—and sometimes, drowsing through a meeting at work, I found myself fantasizing about it—I would have worn fur, no compunction, no second thoughts.

But not anymore. Now I was the protestor, a placard waver, now I was fighting for the right of every last weasel and lynx to grow old and die gracefully, now I was Alena Jorgensen's lover and a force to be reckoned with. Of course, my feet hurt and I was running sweat and praying that no one from work would drive by and see me there on the sidewalk with my crazy cohorts and denunciatory sign.

We marched for hours, back and forth, till I thought we'd wear a groove in the pavement. We chanted and jeered and nobody so much as looked at us twice. We could have been Hare Krishnas, bums, antiabortionists, or lepers, what did it matter? To the rest of the world, to the uninitiated masses to whose sorry number I'd belonged just twenty-four hours earlier, we were invisible. I was hungry, tired, discouraged. Alena was ignoring me. Even the woman in red-face was slowing down, her chant a hoarse whisper that was sucked up and obliterated in the roar of traffic. And then, as the afternoon faded toward rush hour, a wizened silvery old woman who might have been an aging star or a star's mother or even the first dimly remembered wife of a studio exec got out of a long white car at the curb and strode fearlessly toward us. Despite the heat—it must have been eighty degrees at this point—she was wearing an ankle-length silver fox coat, a bristling shouldery wafting mass of peltry that must have decimated every burrow on the tundra. It was the moment we'd been waiting for.

A cry went up, shrill and ululating, and we converged on the lone old woman like a Cheyenne war party scouring the plains. The man beside me went down on all fours and howled like a dog. Alena slashed the air with her limp mink, and the blood sang in my ears. "Murderer!" I screamed, getting into it. "Torturer! Nazi!" The strings in my neck were tight. I didn't know what I was saying. The crowd gibbered. The placards danced. I was so close to the old woman I could smell her—her perfume, a whiff of mothballs from the coat—and it intoxicated me, maddened me, and I stepped in front of her to block her path with all the seething militant bulk of my one hundred eighty-five pounds of sinew and muscle.

I never saw the chauffeur. Alena told me afterward that he was a former kickboxing champion who'd been banned from the sport for excessive brutality.

The first blow seemed to drop down from above, a shell lobbed from deep within enemy territory; the others came at me like a windmill churning in a storm. Someone screamed. I remember focusing on the flawless rigid pleats of the chauffeur's trousers, and then things got a bit hazy.

I woke to the dull thump of the surf slamming at the shore and the touch of Alena's lips on my own. I felt as if I'd been broken on the wheel, dismantled, and put back together again. "Lie still," she said, and her tongue moved against my swollen cheek. Stricken, I could only drag my head across the pillow and gaze into the depths of her parti-colored eyes. "You're one of us now," she whispered.

Next morning I didn't even bother to call in sick.

By the end of the week I'd recovered enough to crave meat, for which I felt 55 deeply ashamed, and to wear out a pair of vinyl huaraches on the picket line. Together, and with various coalitions of antivivisectionists, militant Vegans, and cat lovers, Alena and I tramped a hundred miles of sidewalk, spray-painted inflammatory slogans across the windows of supermarkets and burger stands, denounced tanners, furriers, poulterers, and sausage makers, and somehow found time to break up a cockfight in Pacoima. It was exhilarating, heady, dangerous. If I'd been disconnected in the past, I was plugged in now. I felt righteous—for the first time in my life I had a cause—and I had Alena, Alena above all. She fascinated me, fixated me, made me feel like a tomcat leaping in and out of second-story windows, oblivious to the free-fall and the picket fence below. There was her beauty, of course, a triumph of evolution and the happy interchange of genes going all the way back to the cavemen, but it was more than that—it was her commitment to animals, to the righting of wrongs, to morality that made her irresistible. Was it love? The term is something I've always had difficulty with, but I suppose it was. Sure it was. Love, pure and simple. I had it, it had me.

"You know what?" Alena said one night as she stood over the miniature stove, searing tofu in oil and garlic. We'd spent the afternoon demonstrating out front of a tortilla factory that used rendered animal fat as a congealing agent, after which we'd been chased three blocks by an overweight assistant manager at Von's who objected to Alena's spray-painting MEAT IS DEATH over the specials in the front window. I was giddy with the adolescent joy of it. I sank into the couch with a beer and watched Alf limp across the floor to fling himself down and lick at a suspicious spot on the floor. The surf boomed like thunder.

"What?" I said.

"Thanksgiving's coming."

I let it ride a moment, wondering if I should invite Alena to my mother's for the big basted bird stuffed with canned oysters and buttered bread crumbs, and then realized it probably wouldn't be such a great idea. I said nothing.

She glanced over her shoulder. "The animals don't have a whole lot to be 60 thankful for, that's for sure. It's just an excuse for the meat industry to butcher a couple million turkeys, is all it is." She paused; hot safflower oil popped in the pan. "I think it's time for a little road trip," she said. "Can we take your car?"

"Sure, but where are we going?"

She gave me her Gioconda smile. "To liberate some turkeys."

* * *

In the morning I called my boss to tell him I had pancreatic cancer and wouldn't be in for a while, then we threw some things in the car, helped Alf scramble into the back seat, and headed up Route 5 for the San Joaquin Valley. We drove for three hours through a fog so dense the windows might as well have been packed with cotton. Alena was secretive, but I could see she was excited. I knew only that we were on our way to rendezvous with a certain "Rolfe," a longtime friend of hers and a big name in the world of ecotage and animal rights, after which we would commit some desperate and illegal act, for which the turkeys would be eternally grateful.

There was a truck stalled in front of the sign for our exit at Calpurnia Springs, and I had to brake hard and jerk the wheel around twice to keep the tires on the pavement. Alena came up out of her seat and Alf slammed into the armrest like a sack of meal, but we made it. A few minutes later we were gliding through the ghostly vacancy of the town itself, lights drifting past in a nimbus of fog, glowing pink, yellow, and white, and then there was only the blacktop road and the pale void that engulfed it. We'd gone ten miles or so when Alena instructed me to slow down and began to study the right-hand shoulder with a keen, unwavering eye.

The earth breathed in and out. I squinted hard into the soft drifting glow 65 of the headlights. "There, there!" she cried and I swung the wheel to the right, and suddenly we were lurching along a pitted dirt road that rose up from the blacktop like a goat path worn into the side of a mountain. Five minutes later Alf sat up in the back seat and began to whine, and then a crude unpainted shack began to detach itself from the vagueness around us.

Rolfe met us on the porch. He was tall and leathery, in his fifties, I guessed, with a shock of hair and rutted features that brought Samuel Beckett to mind. He was wearing gumboots and jeans and a faded lumberjack shirt that looked as if it had been washed a hundred times. Alf took a quick pee against the side of the house, then fumbled up the steps to roll over and fawn at his feet.

"Rolfe!" Alena called, and there was too much animation in her voice, too much familiarity, for my taste. She took the steps in a bound and threw herself in his arms. I watched them kiss, and it wasn't a fatherly-daughterly sort of kiss, not at all. It was a kiss with some meaning behind it, and I didn't like it. Rolfe, I thought: What kind of name is that?

"Rolfe," Alena gasped, still a little breathless from bouncing up the steps like a cheerleader, "I'd like you to meet Jim."

That was my signal. I ascended the porch steps and held out my hand. Rolfe gave me a look out of the hooded depths of his eyes and then took my hand in a hard calloused grip, the grip of the wood splitter, the fence mender, the liberator of hothouse turkeys and laboratory mice. "A pleasure," he said, and his voice rasped like sandpaper.

There was a fire going inside, and Alena and I sat before it and warmed our 70 hands while Alf whined and sniffed and Rolfe served Red Zinger tea in Japanese cups the size of thimbles. Alena hadn't stopped chattering since we stepped through the door, and Rolfe came right back at her in his woody rasp, the two of them exchanging names and news and gossip as if they were talking in code. I studied the reproductions of teal and widgeon that hung from the peeling walls, noted the case of Heinz vegetarian beans in the corr and the

half gallon of Jack Daniel's on the mantel. Finally, after the third cup of tea Ale tumbled back in her chair—a huge old Salvation Army sort of thing with a soiled antimacassar—and said, "So what's the plan?"

Rolfe gave me another look, a quick predatory darting of the eyes, as if he weren't sure I could be trusted, and then turned back to Alena. "Hedda Gabler's Range-Fed Turkey Ranch," he said. "And no, I don't find the name cute, not at all." He looked at me now, a long steady assay. "They grind up the heads for cat food, and the neck, the organs, and the rest, that they wrap up in paper and stuff back in the body cavity like it was a war atrocity or something. Whatever did a turkey go and do to us to deserve a fate like that?"

The question was rhetorical, even if it seemed to have been aimed at me, and I made no response other than to compose my face in a look that wedded grief, outrage, and resolve. I was thinking of all the turkeys I'd sent to their doom, of the plucked wishbones, the pope's noses,^o and the crisp browned skin I used to relish as a kid. It brought a lump to my throat, and something more: I realized I was hungry.

"Ben Franklin wanted to make them our national symbol," Alena chimed in, "did you know that? But the meat eaters won out."

"Fifty thousand birds," Rolfe said, glancing at Alena and bringing his incendiary gaze back to rest on me. "I have information they're going to start slaughtering them tomorrow, for the fresh-not-frozen market."

"Yuppie poultry," Alena's voice was drenched in disgust.

For a moment, no one spoke. I became aware of the crackling of the fire. The fog pressed at the windows. It was getting dark.

"You can see the place from the highway," Rolfe said finally, "but the only access is through Calpurnia Springs. It's about twenty miles—twenty-two point three, to be exact."

Alena's eyes were bright. She was gazing on Rolfe as if he'd just dropped down from heaven. I felt something heave in my stomach.

"We strike tonight."

Rolfe insisted that we take my car—"Everybody around here knows my pickup, and I can't take any chances on a little operation like this"—but we did mask the plates, front and back, with an inch-thick smear of mud. We blackened our faces like commandos and collected our tools from the shed out back—tin snips, a crowbar, and two five-gallon cans of gasoline. "Gasoline?" I said, trying the heft of the can. Rolfe gave me a craggy look. "To create a diversion," he said. Alf, for obvious reasons, stayed behind in the shack.

If the fog had been thick in daylight, it was impenetrable now, the sky collapsed upon the earth. It took hold of the headlights and threw them back at me till my eyes began to water from the effort of keeping the car on the road. But for the ruts and bumps we might have been floating in space. Alena sat up front between Rolfe and me, curiously silent. Rolfe didn't have much to say either, save for the occasional grunted command: "Hang a right here"; "Hard left"; "Easy, easy." I thought about meat and jail and the heroic proportions to which I was about to swell in Alena's eyes and what I intended to do to her when we finally got to bed. It was 2:00 A.M. by the dashboard clock.

^opope's noses: Slang for the fleshy tail sections of turkeys and other poultry.

"Okay," Rolfe said, and his voice came at me so suddenly I startled me, "pull over here—and kill the lights."

We stepped out into the hush of night and eased the doors shut behind us. I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear the not-so-distant hiss of traffic on the highway, and another sound, too, muffled and indistinct, the gentle unconscious suspiration of thousands upon thousands of my fellow creatures. And I could smell them, a seething rancid odor of feces and feathers and naked scaly feet that crawled down my throat and burned my nostrils. "Whew," I said in a whisper, "I can smell them."

Rolfe and Alena were vague presences at my side. Rolfe flipped open the trunk and in the next moment I felt the heft of a crowbar and a pair of tin snips in my hand. "Listen, you, Jim," Rolfe whispered, taking me by the wrist in his iron grip and leading me half-a-dozen steps forward. "Feel this?"

I felt a grid of wire, which he promptly cut: *snip, snip, snip.*

"This is their enclosure—they're out there in the day, scratching around in the dirt. You get lost, you follow this wire. Now, you're going to take a section out of this side, Alena's got the west side and I've got the south. Once that's done I signal with the flashlight and we bust open the doors to the turkey houses—they're these big low white buildings, you'll see them when you get close—and flush the birds out. Don't worry about me or Alena. Just worry about getting as many birds out as you can."

I was worried. Worried about everything, from some half-crazed farmer with a shotgun or AK-47 or whatever they carried these days, to losing Alena in the fog, to the turkeys themselves: How big were they? Were they violent? They had claws and beaks, didn't they? And how were they going to feel about me bursting into their bedroom in the middle of the night?

"And when the gas cans go up, you hightail it back to the car, got it?"

I could hear the turkeys tossing in their sleep. A truck shifted gears out on the highway. "I think so," I whispered.

"And one more thing—be sure to leave the keys in the ignition."

This gave me pause. "But—"

"The getaway." Alena was so close I could feel her breath on my ear. "I mean, we don't want to be fumbling around for the keys when all hell is breaking loose out there, do we?"

I eased open the door and reinserted the keys in the ignition, even though the automatic buzzer warned me against it. "Okay," I murmured, but they were already gone, soaked up in the shadows and the mist. At this point my heart was hammering so loudly I could barely hear the rustling of the turkeys—this is crazy, I told myself, it's hurtful and wrong, not to mention illegal. Spray-painting slogans was one thing, but this was something else altogether. I thought of the turkey farmer asleep in his bed, an entrepreneur working to make America strong, a man with a wife and kids and a mortgage . . . but then I thought of all those innocent turkeys consigned to death, and finally I thought of Alena, long-legged and loving, and the way she came to me out of the darkness of the bathroom and the boom of the surf. I took the tin snips to the wire.

I must have been at it half an hour, forty-five minutes, gradually working my way toward the big white sheds that had begun to emerge from the gloom up ahead, when I saw Rolfe's flashlight blinking off to my left. This was my signal to head to the nearest shed, snap off the padlock with my crowbar, fling open the

doors, and herd a bunch of cranky suspicious gobblers out into the night. It was now or never. I looked twice round me and then broke for the near shed in an awkward crouching gait. The turkeys must have sensed that something was up — from behind the long white windowless wall there arose a watchful gabbling, a souging of feathers that fanned up like a breeze in the treetops. *Hold on, you toms and hens*, I thought, *freedom is at hand*. A jerk of the wrist, and the padlock fell to the ground. Blood pounded in my ears, I took hold of the sliding door and jerked it open with a great dull booming reverberation — and suddenly, there they were, turkeys, thousands upon thousands of them, cloaked in white feathers under a string of dim yellow bulbs. The light glinted in their reptilian eyes. Somewhere a dog began to bark.

I steeled myself and sprang through the door with a shout, whirling the crowbar over my head, "All right!" I boomed, and the echo gave it back to me a hundred times over, "this is it! Turkeys, on your feet!" Nothing. No response. But for the whisper of rustling feathers and the alertly cocked heads, they might have been sculptures, throw pillows, they might as well have been dead and butchered and served up with yams and onions and all the trimmings. The barking of the dog went up a notch. I thought I heard voices.

The turkeys crouched on the concrete floor, wave upon wave of them, stupid and immovable; they perched in the rafters, on shelves and platforms, huddled in wooden stalls. Desperate, I rushed into the front rank of them, swinging my crowbar, stamping my feet, and howling like the wishbone plucker I once was. That did it. There was a shriek from the nearest bird and the others took it up till an unholy racket filled the place, and now they were moving, tumbling down from their perches, flapping their wings in a storm of dried excrement and pecked-over grain, pouring across the concrete floor till it vanished beneath them. Encouraged, I screamed again — "Yeeee-ha-ha-ha-ha!" — and beat at the aluminum walls with the crowbar as the turkeys shot through the doorway and out into the night.

It was then that the black mouth of the doorway erupted with light and the *ka-boom!* of the gas cans sent a tremor through the earth. *Run!* a voice screamed in my head, and the adrenaline kicked in and all of a sudden I was scrambling for the door in a hurricane of turkeys. They were everywhere, flapping their wings, gobbling and screeching, loosing their bowels in panic. Something hit the back of my legs and all at once I was down amongst them, on the floor, in the dirt and feathers and wet turkey shit. I was a roadbed, a turkey expressway. Their claws dug at my back, my shoulders, the crown of my head. Panicked now, choking on feathers and dust and worse, I fought to my feet as the big screeching birds launched themselves round me, and staggered out into the barnyard. "There! Who's that there?" a voice roared, and I was off and running.

What can I say? I vaulted turkeys, kicked them aside like so many footballs, slashed and tore at them as they sailed through the air. I ran till my lungs felt as if they were burning right through my chest, disoriented, bewildered, terrified of the shotgun blast I was sure would cut me down at any moment. Behind me the fire raged and lit the fog till it glowed blood-red and hellish. But where was the fence? And where the car?

I got control of my feet then and stood stock-still in a flurry of turkeys, squinting into the wall of fog. Was that it? Was that the car over there? At that moment I heard an engine start up somewhere behind me — a familiar engin

with a familiar coughing gurgle in the throat of the carburetor — and then the lights blinked on briefly three hundred yards away. I heard the engine race and listened, helpless, as the car roared off in the opposite direction. I stood there a moment longer, forlorn and forsaken, and then I ran blindly off into the night, putting the fire and the shouts and the barking and the incessant mindless squawking of the turkeys as far behind me as I could.

When dawn finally broke, it was only just perceptibly, so thick was the fog. I'd made my way to a blacktop road — which road and where it led I didn't know — and sat crouched and shivering in a clump of weed just off the shoulder. Alena wouldn't desert me, I was sure of that — she loved me, as I loved her; needed me, as I needed her — and I was sure she'd be cruising along the back roads looking for me. My pride was wounded, of course, and if I never laid eyes on Rolfe again I felt I wouldn't be missing much, but at least I hadn't been drilled full of shot, savaged by farm dogs, or pecked to death by irate turkeys. I was sore all over, my shin throbbed where I'd slammed into something substantial while vaulting through the night, there were feathers in my hair, and my face and arms were a mosaic of cuts and scratches and long trailing fissures of dirt. I'd been sitting there for what seemed like hours, cursing Rolfe, developing suspicions about Alena and unflattering theories about environmentalists in general, when finally I heard the familiar slurp and roar of my Chevy Citation cutting through the mist ahead of me.

Rolfe was driving, his face impassive. I flung myself into the road like a tattered beggar, waving my arms over my head and giving vent to my joy, and he very nearly ran me down. Alena was out of the car before it stopped, wrapping me up in her arms, and then she was bundling me into the rear seat with Alf and we were on our way back to the hideaway. "What happened?" she cried, as if she couldn't have guessed. "Where were you? We waited as long as we could."

I was feeling sulky, betrayed, feeling as if I was owed a whole lot more than a perfunctory hug and a string of insipid questions. Still, as I told my tale I began to warm to it — they'd got away in the car with the heater going, and I'd stayed behind to fight the turkeys, the farmers, and the elements, too, and if that wasn't heroic, I'd like to know what was. I looked into Alena's admiring eyes and pictured Rolfe's shack, a nip or two from the bottle of Jack Daniel's, maybe a peanut-butter-and-tofu sandwich, and then the bed, with Alena in it. Rolfe said nothing.

Back at Rolfe's, I took a shower and scrubbed the turkey droppings from my pores, then helped myself to the bourbon. It was ten in the morning and the house was dark — if the world had ever been without fog, there was no sign of it here. When Rolfe stepped out on the porch to fetch an armload of firewood, I pulled Alena down into my lap. "Hey," she murmured, "I thought you were an invalid."

She was wearing a pair of too-tight jeans and an oversize sweater with nothing underneath it. I slipped my hand inside the sweater and found something to hold on to. "Invalid?" I said, nuzzling at her sleeve. "Hell, I'm a turkey liberator, an ecoguerrilla, a friend of the animals and the environment, too."

She laughed, but she pushed herself up and crossed the room to stare out the occluded window. "Listen, Jim," she said, "what we did last night was great, really great, but it's just the beginning." Alf looked up at her expectantly. I heard Rolfe fumbling around on the porch, the thump of wood on wood. She

...d around to face me now. "What I mean is, Rolfe wants me to go up Wyoming for a little bit, just outside of Yellowstone —"

Me? Rolfe wants me? There was no invitation in that, no plurality, no acknowledgment of all we'd done and meant to each other. "For what?" I said. "What do you mean?"

"There's this grizzly — a pair of them, actually — and they've been raiding places outside the park. One of them made off with the mayor's Doberman the other night and the people are up in arms. We — I mean Rolfe and me and some other people from the old Bolt Weevils in Minnesota? — we're going to go up there and make sure the Park Service — or the local yahoos — don't eliminate them. The bears, I mean."

My tone was corrosive. "You and Rolfe?"

"There's nothing between us, if that's what you're thinking. This has to do with animals, that's all."

"Like us?"

She shook her head slowly. "Not like us, no. We're the plague on this planet, don't you know that?"

Suddenly I was angry. Seething. Here I'd crouched in the bushes all night, covered in turkey crap, and now I was part of a plague. I was on my feet. "No, I don't know that."

She gave me a look that let me know it didn't matter, that she was already gone, that her agenda, at least for the moment, didn't include me and there was no use arguing about it. "Look," she said, her voice dropping as Rolfe slammed back through the door with a load of wood, "I'll see you in L.A. in a month or so, okay?" She gave me an apologetic smile. "Water the plants for me?"

An hour later I was on the road again. I'd helped Rolfe stack the wood beside the fireplace, allowed Alena to brush my lips with a good-bye kiss, and then stood there on the porch while Rolfe locked up, lifted Alf into the bed of his pickup, and rumbled down the rutted dirt road with Alena at his side. I watched till their brake lights dissolved in the drifting gray mist, then fired up the Citation and lurched down the road behind them. *A month or so*: I felt hollow inside. I pictured her with Rolfe, eating yogurt and wheat germ, stopping at motels, wrestling grizzlies, and spiking trees. The hollowness opened up, cored me out till I felt as if I'd been plucked and gutted and served up on a platter myself.

I found my way back through Calpurnia Springs without incident — there were no roadblocks, no flashing lights and grim-looking troopers searching trunks and back seats for a tallish thirty-year-old ecoterrorist with turkey tracks down his back — but after I turned onto the highway for Los Angeles, I had a shock. Ten miles up the road my nightmare materialized out of the gloom: red lights everywhere, signal flares and police cars lined up on the shoulder. I was on the very edge of panicking, a beat away from cutting across the median and giving them a run for it, when I saw the truck jackknifed up ahead. I slowed to forty, thirty, and then hit the brakes again. In a moment I was stalled in a line of cars and there was something all over the road, ghostly and white in the fog. At first I thought it must have been flung from the truck, rolls of toilet paper or crates of soap powder ruptured on the pavement. It was neither. As I inched closer, the tires creeping now, the pulse of the lights in my

face, I saw that the road was coated in feathers, turkey feathers. A storm of them. A blizzard. And more: there was flesh there too, slick and greasy, a red pulp ground into the surface of the road, thrown up like slush from the tires of the car ahead of me, ground beneath the massive wheels of the truck. Turkeys. Turkeys everywhere.

The car crept forward. I flicked on the windshield wipers, hit the washer button, and for a moment a scrim of diluted blood obscured the windows and the hollowness opened up inside of me till I thought it would suck me inside out. Behind me, someone was leaning on his horn. A trooper loomed up out of the gloom, waving me on with the dead yellow eye of his flashlight. I thought of Alena and felt sick. All there was between us had come to this, expectations gone sour, a smear on the road. I wanted to get out and shoot myself, turn myself in, close my eyes, and wake up in jail, in a hair shirt, in a straitjacket, anything. It went on. Time passed. Nothing moved. And then, miraculously, a vision began to emerge from behind the smeared glass and the gray belly of the fog, lights glowing golden in the waste. I saw the sign, Gas/Food/Lodging, and my hand was on the blinker.

It took me a moment, picturing the place, the generic tile, the false cheer of the lights, the odor of charred flesh hanging heavy on the air, Big Mac, three-piece dark meat, carne asada, cheeseburger. The engine coughed. The lights glowed. I didn't think of Alena then, didn't think of Rolfe or grizzlies or the doomed bleating flocks and herds, or of the blind bunnies and cancerous mice — I thought only of the cavern opening inside me and how to fill it. "Meat," and I spoke the word aloud, talking to calm myself as if I'd awakened from a bad dream, "it's only meat."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. FIRST RESPONSE. How do your own views of vegetarianism and animal rights' groups influence your response to this story?
2. Comment on how Boyle achieves humorous effects through his first-person narrator in the story's first paragraph.
3. Describe the tone of the first-person narrator. How does he regard the world — the people, situations, and events — he encounters? Why is it especially appropriate that he has a job writing copy for an advertising agency?
4. How does Boyle's style reveal the narrator's character? Select several paragraphs to illustrate your points.
5. How does the narrator use irony? Select three instances of his use of irony, and discuss their effects and what they reveal about him.
6. How does Boyle create a genuinely comic character with Alf? What is the narrator's relationship with Alf?
7. Characterize Alena. Why is the narrator both attracted to her and puzzled by her?
8. How do you think the story would differ if it were told from Alena's point of view?
9. What is your response to Alena's descriptions of commercial experiments on animals? How does the narrator respond to them?
10. What is the narrator's view of the protests he engages in with Alena? Discuss specific passages to support your answer.

11. How does paragraph 93 explain the narrator's willingness to go along with the raid on the turkey farm?
12. Describe the narrator's response to Rolfe. How does Boyle make Rolfe into a comic figure?
13. What is the major conflict in the story? How is it resolved in the story's final paragraphs?
14. How do the story's last words, "it's only meat," shed light on the significance of the title? What does a dictionary tell you about possible readings of the title?

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. What do Alena and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* (p. 310) have in common as reformers? Are there also significant differences?
2. Read the discussion of new historicist criticism in Chapter 37, "Critical Strategies for Reading," and describe how a new historicist might use "Carnal Knowledge" to describe aspects of American life in the early 1990s.
3. Write an essay comparing Boyle's humorous treatment of animal rights issues with Alison Baker's humorous approach to sex and gender issues in "Better Be Ready 'Bout Half Past Eight" (p. 617).

SUSAN MINOT (B. 1956)

Born and raised in Massachusetts, Susan Minot earned a B.A. at Brown University and an M.F.A. at Columbia University. Before devoting herself full-time to writing, Minot worked as an assistant editor at *Grand Street* magazine. Her stories have appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The New Yorker*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Paris Review*. Her short stories have been collected in *Lust and Other Stories* (1989), and she has published two novels — *Monkeys* (1986) and *Folly* (1992).

Lust

1984

Leo was from a long time ago, the first one I ever saw nude. In the spring before the Hellmans filled their pool, we'd go down there in the deep end, with baby oil, and like that. I met him the first month away at boarding school. He had a halo from the campus light behind him. I flipped.

Roger was fast: In his illegal car, we drove to the reservoir, the radio blaring, talking fast, fast, fast. He was always going for my zipper. He got kicked out sophomore year.

By the time the band got around to playing "Wild Horses," I had tasted Bruce's tongue. We were clicking in the shadows on the other side of the

amplifier, out of Mrs. Donovan's line of vision. It tasted like salt, with my neck bent back, because we had been dancing so hard before.

Tim's line: "I'd like to see you in a bathing suit." I knew it was his line when he said the exact same thing to Annie Hines.

You'd go on walks to get off campus. It was raining like hell, my sweater as sopped as a wet sheep. Tim pinned me to a tree, the woods light brown and dark brown, a white house half hidden with the lights already on. The water was as loud as a crowd hissing. He made certain comments about my forehead, about my cheeks.

We started off sitting at one end of the couch and then our feet were squished against the armrest and then he went over to turn off the TV and came back after he had taken off his shirt and then we slid onto the floor and he got up again to close the door, then came back to me, a body waiting on the rug.

You'd try to wipe off the table or to do the dishes and Willie would untuck your shirt and get his hands up under in front, standing behind you, making puffy noises in your ear.

He likes it when I wash my hair. He covers his face with it and if I start to say something, he goes, "Shush."

For a long time, I had Philip on the brain. The less they noticed you, the more you got them on the brain.

My parents had no idea. Parents never really know what's going on, especially when you're away at school most of the time. If she met them, my mother might say, "Oliver seems nice" or "I like that one" without much of an opinion. If she didn't like them, "He's a funny fellow, isn't he?" or "Johnny's perfectly nice but a drink of water." My father was too shy to talk to them at all unless they played sports and he'd ask them about that.

The sand was almost cold underneath because the sun was long gone. Eben piled a mound over my feet, patting around my ankles, the ghostly surf rumbling behind him in the dark. He was the first person I ever knew who died, later that summer, in a car crash. I thought about it for a long time.

"Come here," he says on the porch.

I go over to the hammock and he takes my wrist with two fingers.

"What?"

He kisses my palm then directs my hand to his fly.

15

Songs went with whichever boy it was. "Sugar Magnolia" was Tim, with the line "Rolling in the rushes/down by the riverside." With "Darkness Darkness," I'd picture Philip with his long hair. Hearing "Under My Thumb" there'd be the smell of Jamie's suede jacket.

Source: Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings
Editors: James E. Kirby and Donald Yates
Publisher: New Directions
Date: 1964
Place: New York

Preface

Jorge Luis Borges is a great writer who has composed only little essays or short narratives. Yet they suffice for us to call him great because of their wonderful intelligence, their wealth of invention, and their tight, almost mathematical, style. Argentine by birth and temperament, but nurtured on universal literature, Borges has no spiritual homeland. He creates, outside time and space, imaginary and symbolic worlds. It is a sign of his importance that, in placing him, only strange and perfect works can be called to mind. He is akin to Kafka, Poe, sometimes to Henry James and Wells, always to Valéry by the abrupt projection of his paradoxes in what has been called "his private metaphysics."

His sources are innumerable and unexpected. Borges has read everything, and especially what nobody reads any more: the Cabalists, the Alexandrine Greeks, medieval philosophers. His erudition is not profound—he asks of it only flashes of lightning and ideas—but it is vast. For example, Pascal wrote: "Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere." Borges sets out to hunt down this metaphor through the centuries. He finds in Giordano Bruno (1584): "We can assert with certainty that the universe is all center, or that the center of the universe is everywhere and

is

its circumference nowhere." But Giordano Bruno had been able to read in a twelfth-century French theologian, Alain de Lille, a formulation borrowed from the *Corpus Hermeticum* (third century): "God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Such researches, carried out among the Chinese as among the Arabs or the Egyptians, delight Borges, and lead him to the subjects of his stories.

Many of his masters are English. He has an infinite admiration for Wells and is indignant that Oscar Wilde could define him as "a scientific Jules Verne." Borges makes the observation that the fiction of Jules Verne speculates on future *probability* (the submarine, the trip to the moon), that of Wells on pure *possibility* (an invisible man, a flower that devours a man, a machine to explore time), or even on *impossibility* (a man returning from the hereafter with a future flower). Beyond that, a Wells novel symbolically represents features inherent in all human destinies. Any great and lasting book must be ambiguous, Borges says; it is a mirror that makes the reader's features known, but the author must seem to be unaware of the significance of his work—which is an excellent description of Borges's own art. "God must not engage in theology; the writer must not destroy by human reasonings the faith that art requires of us."

He admires Poe and Chesterton as much as he does Wells. Poe wrote perfect tales of fantastic horror and invented the detective story, but he never combined the two types of writing. Chesterton *did* attempt and felicitously brought off this tour de force. Each of Father Brown's adventures proposes to explain, in reason's name, an unexplainable fact. "Though Chesterton disclaimed being a Poe or Kafka, there was, in the material out of which his ego was molded, something that tended to nightmare." Kafka *was* a direct precursor of Borges. *The Castle* might be by Borges, but he would have made it into a ten-page story, both out of lofty laziness and out of concern for perfection. As for Kafka's precursors, Borges's erudition takes pleasure in finding them in Zeno of Elea, Kierkegaard and Robert Browning. In each of these authors there is some Kafka, but if Kafka had not written, nobody would have been able to notice

it—whence this very Borgesian paradox: "Every writer creates his own precursors."

Another man who inspires him is the English writer John William Dunne, author of such curious books about time, in which he claims that the past, present and future exist simultaneously, as is proved by our dreams. (Schopenhauer, Borges remarks, had already written that life and dreams are leaves of the same book: reading them in order is living; skimming through them is dreaming.) In death we shall rediscover all the instants of our life and we shall freely combine them as in dreams. "God, our friends, and Shakespeare will collaborate with us." Nothing pleases Borges better than to play in this way with mind, dreams, space and time. The more complicated the game becomes, the happier he is. The dreamer can be dreamed in his turn. "The Mind was dreaming; the world was its dream." In all philosophers, from Democritus to Spinoza, from Schopenhauer to Kierkegaard, he is on the watch for paradoxical intellectual possibilities.

II

There are to be found in Valéry's notebooks many notes such as this: "Idea for a frightening story: it is discovered that the only remedy for cancer is living human flesh. Consequences." I can well imagine a piece of Borges "fiction" written on such a theme. Reading ancient and modern philosophers, he stops at an idea or a hypothesis. The spark flashes. "If this absurd postulate were developed to its extreme logical consequences," he wonders, "what world would be created?"

For example, an author, Pierre Menard, undertakes to compose *Don Quixote*—not another Quixote, but *the* Quixote. His method? To know Spanish well, to rediscover the Catholic faith, to war against the Moors, to forget the history of Europe—in short, to *be* Miguel de Cervantes. The coincidence then becomes so total that the twentieth-century author rewrites Cervantes' novel literally, *word for word*, and without referring to the original. And here Borges has this astonishing sentence: "The text of Cervantes and that of Menard are verbally identical, but the

second is almost infinitely richer." This he triumphantly demonstrates, for this subject, apparently absurd, in fact expresses a real idea: the *Quixote* that we read is not that of Cervantes, any more than our *Madame Bovary* is that of Flaubert. Each twentieth-century reader involuntarily rewrites in his own way the masterpieces of past centuries. It was enough to make an extrapolation in order to draw Borges's story out of it.

Often a paradox that ought to bowl us over does not strike us in the abstract form given it by philosophers. Borges makes a concrete reality out of it. The "Library of Babel" is the image of the universe, infinite and always started over again. Most of the books in this library are unintelligible, letters thrown together by chance or perversely repeated, but sometimes, in this labyrinth of letters, a reasonable line or sentence is found. Such are the laws of nature, tiny cases of regularity in a chaotic world. The "Lottery in Babylon" is another ingenious and penetrating staging of the role of chance in life. The mysterious Company that distributes good and bad luck reminds us of the "musical banks" in Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*.

Attracted by metaphysics, but accepting no system as true, Borges makes out of all of them a game for the mind. He discovers two tendencies in himself: "one to esteem religious and philosophical ideas for their aesthetic value, and even for what is magical or marvelous in their content. That is perhaps the indication of an essential skepticism. The other is to suppose in advance that the quantity of fables or metaphors of which man's imagination is capable is limited, but that this small number of inventions can be everything to everyone."

Among these fables or ideas, certain ones particularly fascinate him: that of Endless Recurrence, or the circular repetition of all the history of the world, a theme dear to Nietzsche; that of the dream within a dream; that of centuries that seem minutes and seconds that seem years ("The Secret Miracle"); that of the hallucinatory nature of the world. He likes to quote Novalis: "The greatest of sorcerers would be the one who would cast a spell on himself to the degree of taking his own phantasmagoria for autonomous apparitions. Might that not be our case?" Borges answers that indeed it is our case: it is we who have dreamed the universe. We can see in what it consists, the

deliberately constructed interplay of the mirrors and mazes of this thought, difficult but always acute and laden with secrets. In all these stories we find roads that fork, corridors that lead nowhere, except to other corridors, and so on as far as the eye can see. For Borges this is an image of human thought, which endlessly makes its way through concatenations of causes and effects without ever exhausting infinity, and marvels over what is perhaps only inhuman chance. And why wander in these labyrinths? Once more, for aesthetic reasons; because this present infinity, these "vertiginous symmetries," have their tragic beauty. The form is more important than the content.

III

Borges's form often recalls Swift's: the same gravity amid the absurd, the same precision of detail. To demonstrate an impossible discovery, he will adopt the tone of the most scrupulous scholar, mix imaginary writings in with real and erudite sources. Rather than write a whole book, which would bore him, he analyzes a book which has never existed. "Why take five hundred pages," he asks, "to develop an idea whose oral demonstration fits into a few minutes?"

Such is, for example, the narrative that bears this bizarre title: "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." This concerns the history of an unknown planet, complete "with its architectures and quarrels, with the terror of its mythologies and the uproar of its languages, its emperors and seas, its minerals and birds and fish, its algebra and fire, its theological and metaphysical controversies." This invention of a new world appears to be the work of a secret society of astronomers, engineers, biologists, metaphysicians and geometers. This world that they have created, Tlön, is a Berkeleyan and Kierkegaardian world where only inner life exists. On Tlön everyone has his own truth; external objects are whatever each one wants. The international press broadcasts this discovery, and very soon the world of Tlön obliterates our world. An imaginary past takes the place of our own. A group of solitary scientists has transformed the universe. All this is mad, subtle, and gives food for endless thought.

Other stories by Borges are parables, mysterious and never

Preface

explicit; still others are detective narratives in the manner of Chesterton. Their plots remain entirely intellectual. The criminal exploits his familiarity with the methods of the detective. It is Dupin against Dupin or Maigret against Maigret. One of these pieces of "fiction" is the insatiable search for a person through the scarcely perceptible reflections that he has left on other souls. In another, because a condemned man has noticed that expectations never coincide with reality, he imagines the circumstances of his own death. Since they have thus become expectations, they can no longer become realities.

These inventions are described in a pure and scholarly style which must be linked up with Poe, "who begat Baudelaire, who begat Mallarmé, who begat Valéry," who begat Borges. It is especially by his rigor that he reminds us of Valéry. "To be in love is to create a religion whose god is fallible." By his piled-up imperfections he sometimes recalls Flaubert; by the rarity of his adjectives, St. John Perse. "The inconsolable cry of a bird." But, once these relationships are pointed out, it must be said that Borges's style is, like his thought, highly original. Of the metaphysicians of Tlön he writes: "They seek neither truth nor likelihood; they seek astonishment. They think metaphysics is a branch of the literature of fantasy." That rather well defines the greatness and the art of Borges.

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Translated by Sherry Mangan

Introduction

Jorge Luis Borges was born on 24 August 1899 in Buenos Aires, of Spanish, English and (very remotely) Portuguese Jewish origin. His parents were of the intellectual middle class and descended from military and political figures prominent in the struggles for Argentine national independence and unity that occupied most of the nineteenth century. After completing his secondary education in Geneva and then spending some three years in Spain associated with the avant-garde *ultraista* group of poets, Borges returned to Buenos Aires in 1921. There he immediately became the leading exponent and theorist of Argentine *ultraismo*, distinguished from its Spanish counterpart by a peculiar fusion of modern expressionist form and anachronistic nostalgia for certain national values—values most palpably embodied for those writers in the old *criollo* quarters of Buenos Aires—which were by then disappearing amid the postwar boom and rush of foreign immigration. Borges's and his companions' situation was not unlike that of some North American writers of the same generation who suffered the impact of war, industrialism and modern European art on a tranquil Midwestern or Southern heritage.

But out of these general conditions, shared by many in our time, Borges has created a work like no other. Perhaps the most striking characteristic of his writings is their extreme intellectual reaction against all the disorder and contingency of immediate reality, their radical insistence on breaking with the given world

*Tlön, Uqbar,
Orbis Tertius*

I

I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia. The mirror troubled the depths of a corridor in a country house on Gaona Street in Ramos Mejía; the encyclopedia is fallaciously called *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* (New York, 1917) and is a literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1902. The event took place some five years ago. Bioy Casares had had dinner with me that evening and we became lengthily engaged in a vast polemic concerning the composition of a novel in the first person, whose narrator would omit or disfigure the facts and indulge in various contradictions which would permit a few readers—very few readers—to perceive an atrocious or banal reality. From the remote depths of the corridor, the mirror spied upon us. We discovered (such a discovery is inevitable in the late hours of the night) that mirrors have something monstrous about them. Then Bioy Casares recalled that one of the heresiarchs of Uqbar had declared that mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men. I asked him the origin of this memorable observation and he answered that it was reproduced in *The Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*, in its article on Uqbar. The house (which we had rented furnished) had a set of this work. On the last pages of Volume XLVI we found an article on Upsala; on the first pages of Volume XLVII, one on Ural-Altaic Languages, but not a word about Uqbar. Bioy, a bit taken aback, consulted

the volumes of the index. In vain he exhausted all of the imaginable spellings: Ukbar, Uqbar, Ooqbar, Ookbar, Oukbahr . . . Before leaving, he told me that it was a region of Iraq or of Asia Minor. I must confess that I agreed with some discomfort. I conjectured that this undocumented country and its anonymous heresiarch were a fiction devised by Bioy's modesty in order to justify a statement. The fruitless examination of one of Justus Perthes' atlases fortified my doubt.

The following day, Bioy called me from Buenos Aires. He told me he had before him the article on Uqbar, in Volume XLVI of the encyclopedia. The heresiarch's name was not forthcoming, but there was a note on his doctrine, formulated in words almost identical to those he had repeated, though perhaps literarily inferior. He had recalled: *Copulation and mirrors are abominable*. The text of the encyclopedia said: *For one of those gnostics, the visible universe was an illusion or (more precisely) a sophism. Mirrors and fatherhood are abominable because they multiply and disseminate that universe*. I told him, in all truthfulness, that I should like to see that article. A few days later he brought it. This surprised me, since the scrupulous cartographical indices of Ritter's *Erdkunde* were plentifully ignorant of the name Uqbar.

The tome Bioy brought was, in fact, Volume XLVI of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia*. On the half-title page and the spine, the alphabetical marking (Tor-Ups) was that of our copy, but, instead of 917, it contained 921 pages. These four additional pages made up the article on Uqbar, which (as the reader will have noticed) was not indicated by the alphabetical marking. We later determined that there was no other difference between the volumes. Both of them (as I believe I have indicated) are reprints of the tenth *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Bioy had acquired his copy at some sale or other.

We read the article with some care. The passage recalled by Bioy was perhaps the only surprising one. The rest of it seemed very plausible, quite in keeping with the general tone of the work and (as is natural) a bit boring. Reading it over again, we discovered beneath its rigorous prose a fundamental vagueness. Of the fourteen names which figured in the geographical part, we

only recognized three—Khorasan, Armenia, Erzerum—interpolated in the text in an ambiguous way. Of the historical names, only one: the impostor magician Smerdis, invoked more as a metaphor. The note seemed to fix the boundaries of Uqbar, but its nebulous reference points were rivers and craters and mountain ranges of that same region. We read, for example, that the lowlands of Tsai Khaldun and the Axa Delta marked the southern frontier and that on the islands of the delta wild horses procreate. All this, on the first part of page 918. In the historical section (page 920) we learned that as a result of the religious persecutions of the thirteenth century, the orthodox believers sought refuge on these islands, where to this day their obelisks remain and where it is not uncommon to unearth their stone mirrors. The section on Language and Literature was brief. Only one trait is worthy of recollection: it noted that the literature of Uqbar was one of fantasy and that its epics and legends never referred to reality, but to the two imaginary regions of Mlejnas and Tlön . . . The bibliography enumerated four volumes which we have not yet found, though the third—Silas Haslam: *History of the Land Called Uqbar*, 1874—figures in the catalogues of Bernard Quaritch's book shop.¹ The first, *Lesbare und lesenswerthe Bemerkungen über das Land Ukkbar in Klein-Asien*, dates from 1641 and is the work of Johannes Valentinus Andreaë. This fact is significant; a few years later, I came upon that name in the unsuspected pages of De Quincey (*Writings*, Volume XIII) and learned that it belonged to a German theologian who, in the early seventeenth century, described the imaginary community of Rosae Crucis—a community that others founded later, in imitation of what he had prefigured.

That night we visited the National Library. In vain we exhausted atlases, catalogues, annuals of geographical societies, travelers' and historians' memoirs: no one had ever been in Uqbar. Neither did the general index of Bioy's encyclopedia register that name. The following day, Carlos Mastronardi (to whom I had related the matter) noticed the black and gold covers of the *Anglo-American Cyclopaedia* in a bookshop on

¹ Haslam has also published *A General History of Labyrinths*.

Corrientes and Talcahuano . . . He entered and examined Volume XLVI. Of course, he did not find the slightest indication of Uqbar.

II

Some limited and waning memory of Herbert Ashe, an engineer of the southern railways, persists in the hotel at Adrogué, amongst the effusive honeysuckles and in the illusory depths of the mirrors. In his lifetime, he suffered from unreality, as do so many Englishmen; once dead, he is not even the ghost he was then. He was tall and listless and his tired rectangular beard had once been red. I understand he was a widower, without children. Every few years he would go to England, to visit (I judge from some photographs he showed us) a sundial and a few oaks. He and my father had entered into one of those close (the adjective is excessive) English friendships that begin by excluding confidences and very soon dispense with dialogue. They used to carry out an exchange of books and newspapers and engage in taciturn chess games . . . I remember him in the hotel corridor, with a mathematics book in his hand, sometimes looking at the irrecoverable colors of the sky. One afternoon, we spoke of the duodecimal system of numbering (in which twelve is written as 10). Ashe said that he was converting some kind of tables from the duodecimal to the sexagesimal system (in which sixty is written as 10). He added that the task had been entrusted to him by a Norwegian, in Rio Grande do Sul. We had known him for eight years and he had never mentioned his sojourn in that region . . . We talked of country life, of the *capangas*, of the Brazilian etymology of the word *gaucho* (which some old Uruguayans still pronounce *gaúcho*) and nothing more was said—may God forgive me—of duodecimal functions. In September of 1937 (we were not at the hotel), Herbert Ashe died of a ruptured aneurysm. A few days before, he had received a sealed and certified package from Brazil. It was a book in large octavo. Ashe left it at the bar, where—months later—I found it. I began to leaf through it and experienced an astonished and airy feeling of vertigo which I shall not describe, for this is not the story of my emotions but of Uqbar and Tlön and Orbis Tertius. On one

of the nights of Islam called the Night of Nights, the secret doors of heaven open wide and the water in the jars becomes sweeter; if those doors opened, I would not feel what I felt that afternoon. The book was written in English and contained 1001 pages. On the yellow leather back I read these curious words which were repeated on the title page: *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. There was no indication of date or place. On the first page and on a leaf of silk paper that covered one of the color plates there was stamped a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius*. Two years before I had discovered, in a volume of a certain pirated encyclopedia, a superficial description of a nonexistent country; now chance afforded me something more precious and arduous. Now I held in my hands a vast methodical fragment of an unknown planet's entire history, with its architecture and its playing cards, with the dread of its mythologies and the murmur of its languages, with its emperors and its seas, with its minerals and its birds and its fish, with its algebra and its fire, with its theological and metaphysical controversy. And all of it articulated, coherent, with no visible doctrinal intent or tone of parody.

In the "Eleventh Volume" which I have mentioned, there are allusions to preceding and succeeding volumes. In an article in the *N. R. F.* which is now classic, Néstor Ibarra has denied the existence of those companion volumes; Ezequiel Martínez Estrada and Drieu La Rochelle have refuted that doubt, perhaps victoriously. The fact is that up to now the most diligent inquiries have been fruitless. In vain we have upended the libraries of the two Americas and of Europe. Alfonso Reyes, tired of these subordinate sleuthing procedures, proposes that we should all undertake the task of reconstructing the many and weighty tomes that are lacking: *ex ungue leonem*. He calculates, half in earnest and half jokingly, that a generation of *tlönistas* should be sufficient. This venturesome computation brings us back to the fundamental problem: Who are the inventors of Tlön? The plural is inevitable, because the hypothesis of a lone inventor—an infinite Leibniz laboring away darkly and modestly—has been unanimously discounted. It is conjectured that this brave new world is the work of a secret society of astronomers, biologists,

engineers, metaphysicians, poets, chemists, algebraists, moralists, painters, geometers . . . directed by an obscure man of genius. Individuals mastering these diverse disciplines are abundant, but not so those capable of inventiveness and less so those capable of subordinating that inventiveness to a rigorous and systematic plan. This plan is so vast that each writer's contribution is infinitesimal. At first it was believed that Tlön was a mere chaos, an irresponsible license of the imagination; now it is known that it is a cosmos and that the intimate laws which govern it have been formulated, at least provisionally. Let it suffice for me to recall that the apparent contradictions of the Eleventh Volume are the fundamental basis for the proof that the other volumes exist, so lucid and exact is the order observed in it. The popular magazines, with pardonable excess, have spread news of the zoology and topography of Tlön; I think its transparent tigers and towers of blood perhaps do not merit the continued attention of *all* men. I shall venture to request a few minutes to expound its concept of the universe.

Hume noted for all time that Berkeley's arguments did not admit the slightest refutation nor did they cause the slightest conviction. This dictum is entirely correct in its application to the earth, but entirely false in Tlön. The nations of this planet are congenitally idealist. Their language and the derivations of their language—religion, letters, metaphysics—all presuppose idealism. The world for them is not a concourse of objects in space; it is a heterogeneous series of independent acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön's conjectural *Ursprache*, from which the "present" languages and the dialects are derived: there are impersonal verbs, modified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word corresponding to the word "moon," but there is a verb which in English would be "to moon" or "to moonate." "The moon rose above the river" is *hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö*, or literally: "upward behind the on-streaming it mooned."

The preceding applies to the languages of the southern hemisphere. In those of the northern hemisphere (on whose *Ursprache* there is very little data in the Eleventh Volume) the prime unit

is not the verb, but the monosyllabic adjective. The noun is formed by an accumulation of adjectives. They do not say "moon," but rather "round airy-light on dark" or "pale-orange-of-the-sky" or any other such combination. In the example selected the mass of adjectives refers to a real object, but this is purely fortuitous. The literature of this hemisphere (like Meinong's subsistent world) abounds in ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs. At times they are determined by mere simultaneity. There are objects composed of two terms, one of visual and another of auditory character: the color of the rising sun and the faraway cry of a bird. There are objects of many terms: the sun and the water on a swimmer's chest, the vague tremulous rose color we see with our eyes closed, the sensation of being carried along by a river and also by sleep. These second-degree objects can be combined with others; through the use of certain abbreviations, the process is practically infinite. There are famous poems made up of one enormous word. This word forms a *poetic object* created by the author. The fact that no one believes in the reality of nouns paradoxically causes their number to be unending. The languages of Tlön's northern hemisphere contain all the nouns of the Indo-European languages—and many others as well.

It is no exaggeration to state that the classic culture of Tlön comprises only one discipline: psychology. All others are subordinated to it. I have said that the men of this planet conceive the universe as a series of mental processes which do not develop in space but successively in time. Spinoza ascribes to his inexhaustible divinity the attributes of extension and thought; no one in Tlön would understand the juxtaposition of the first (which is typical only of certain states) and the second—which is a perfect synonym of the cosmos. In other words, they do not conceive that the spatial persists in time. The perception of a cloud of smoke on the horizon and then of the burning field and then of the half-extinguished cigarette that produced the blaze is considered an example of association of ideas.

This monism or complete idealism invalidates all science. If we explain (or judge) a fact, we connect it with another; such linking, in Tlön, is a later state of the subject which cannot

affect or illuminate the previous state. Every mental state is irreducible: the mere fact of naming it—i.e., of classifying it—implies a falsification. From which it can be deduced that there are no sciences on Tlön, not even reasoning. The paradoxical truth is that they do exist, and in almost uncountable number. The same thing happens with philosophies as happens with nouns in the northern hemisphere. The fact that every philosophy is by definition a dialectical game, a *Philosophie des Als Ob*, has caused them to multiply. There is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type. The metaphysicians of Tlön do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature. They know that a system is nothing more than the subordination of all aspects of the universe to any one such aspect. Even the phrase "all aspects" is rejectable, for it supposes the impossible addition of the present and of all past moments. Neither is it licit to use the plural "past moments," since it supposes another impossible operation . . . One of the schools of Tlön goes so far as to negate time: it reasons that the present is indefinite, that the future has no reality other than as a present hope, that the past has no reality other than as a present memory.¹ Another school declares that *all time* has already transpired and that our life is only the crepuscular and no doubt falsified and mutilated memory or reflection of an irrecoverable process. Another, that the history of the universe—and in it our lives and the most tenuous detail of our lives—is the scripture produced by a subordinate god in order to communicate with a demon. Another, that the universe is comparable to those cryptographs in which not all the symbols are valid and that only what happens every three hundred nights is true. Another, that while we sleep here, we are awake elsewhere and that in this way every man is two men.

Amongst the doctrines of Tlön, none has merited the scandalous reception accorded to materialism. Some thinkers have formulated it with less clarity than fervor, as one might put forth a

¹ Russell (*The Analysis of Mind*, 1921, page 159) supposes that the planet has been created a few minutes ago, furnished with a humanity that "remembers" an illusory past.

paradox. In order to facilitate the comprehension of this inconceivable thesis, a heresiarch of the eleventh century¹ devised the sophism of the nine copper coins, whose scandalous renown is in Tlön equivalent to that of the Eleatic paradoxes. There are many versions of this "specious reasoning," which vary the number of coins and the number of discoveries; the following is the most common:

On Tuesday, X crosses a deserted road and loses nine copper coins. On Thursday, Y finds in the road four coins, somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain. On Friday, Z discovers three coins in the road. On Friday morning, X finds two coins in the corridor of his house. The heresiarch would deduce from this story the reality—i.e., the continuity—of the nine coins which were recovered. *It is absurd (he affirmed) to imagine that four of the coins have not existed between Tuesday and Thursday, three between Tuesday and Friday afternoon, two between Tuesday and Friday morning. It is logical to think that they have existed—at least in some secret way, hidden from the comprehension of men—at every moment of those three periods.*

The language of Tlön resists the formulation of this paradox; most people did not even understand it. The defenders of common sense at first did no more than negate the veracity of the anecdote. They repeated that it was a verbal fallacy, based on the rash application of two neologisms not authorized by usage and alien to all rigorous thought: the verbs "find" and "lose," which beg the question, because they presuppose the identity of the first and of the last nine coins. They recalled that all nouns (man, coin, Thursday, Wednesday, rain) have only a metaphorical value. They denounced the treacherous circumstance "somewhat rusted by Wednesday's rain," which presupposes what is trying to be demonstrated: the persistence of the four coins from Tuesday to Thursday. They explained that *equality* is one thing and *identity* another, and formulated a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*: the hypothetical case of nine men who on nine successive nights suffer a severe pain. Would it not be ridiculous—they questioned—to pretend that this pain is one and

¹ A century, according to the duodecimal system, signifies a period of a hundred and forty-four years.

the same?¹ They said that the heresiarch was prompted only by the blasphemous intention of attributing the divine category of *being* to some simple coins and that at times he negated plurality and at other times did not. They argued: if equality implies identity, one would also have to admit that the nine coins are one.

Unbelievably, these refutations were not definitive. A hundred years after the problem was stated, a thinker no less brilliant than the heresiarch but of orthodox tradition formulated a very daring hypothesis. This happy conjecture affirmed that there is only one subject, that this indivisible subject is every being in the universe and that these beings are the organs and masks of the divinity. X is Y and is Z. Z discovers three coins because he remembers that X lost them; X finds two in the corridor because he remembers that the others have been found . . . The Eleventh Volume suggests that three prime reasons determined the complete victory of this idealist pantheism. The first, its repudiation of solipsism; the second, the possibility of preserving the psychological basis of the sciences; the third, the possibility of preserving the cult of the gods. Schopenhauer (the passionate and lucid Schopenhauer) formulates a very similar doctrine in the first volume of *Parerga und Paralipomena*.

The geometry of Tlön comprises two somewhat different disciplines: the visual and the tactile. The latter corresponds to our own geometry and is subordinated to the first. The basis of visual geometry is the surface, not the point. This geometry disregards parallel lines and declares that man in his movement modifies the forms which surround him. The basis of its arithmetic is the notion of indefinite numbers. They emphasize the importance of the concepts of greater and lesser, which our mathematicians symbolize as $>$ and $<$. They maintain that the operation of counting modifies quantities and converts them from indefinite into definite sums. The fact that several individuals

¹ Today, one of the churches of Tlön Platonically maintains that a certain pain, a certain greenish tint of yellow, a certain temperature, a certain sound, are the only reality. All men, in the vertiginous moment of coitus, are the same man. All men who repeat a line from Shakespeare are William Shakespeare.

who count the same quantity should obtain the same result is, for the psychologists, an example of association of ideas or of a good exercise of memory. We already know that in Tlön the subject of knowledge is one and eternal.

In literary practices the idea of a single subject is also all-powerful. It is uncommon for books to be signed. The concept of plagiarism does not exist: it has been established that all works are the creation of one author, who is atemporal and anonymous. The critics often invent authors: they select two dissimilar works—the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, say—attribute them to the same writer and then determine most scrupulously the psychology of this interesting *homme de lettres* . . .

Their books are also different. Works of fiction contain a single plot, with all its imaginable permutations. Those of a philosophical nature invariably include both the thesis and the antithesis, the rigorous pro and con of a doctrine. A book which does not contain its counterbook is considered incomplete.

Centuries and centuries of idealism have not failed to influence reality. In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *brönir* and are, though awkward in form, somewhat longer. Until recently, the *brönir* were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness. It seems unbelievable that their methodical production dates back scarcely a hundred years, but this is what the Eleventh Volume tells us. The first efforts were unsuccessful. However, the *modus operandi* merits description. The director of one of the state prisons told his inmates that there were certain tombs in an ancient river bed and promised freedom to whoever might make an important discovery. During the months preceding the excavation the inmates were shown photographs of what they were to find. This first effort proved that expectation and anxiety can be inhibitory; a week's work with pick and shovel did not manage to unearth anything in the way of a *brön* except a rusty wheel of a period posterior to the experiment. But this was kept in secret and the process was repeated later in four schools. In three of them the failure was

That's what he's doing (infinite joke)

almost complete; in the fourth (whose director died accidentally during the first excavations) the students unearthed—or produced—a gold mask, an archaic sword, two or three clay urns and the moldy and mutilated torso of a king whose chest bore an inscription which it has not yet been possible to decipher. Thus was discovered the unreliability of witnesses who knew of the experimental nature of the search . . . Mass investigations produce contradictory objects; now individual and almost improvised jobs are preferred. The methodical fabrication of *brönir* (says the Eleventh Volume) has performed prodigious services for archaeologists. It has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less plastic and docile than the future. Curiously, the *brönir* of second and third degree—the *brönir* derived from another *brön*, those derived from the *brön* of a *brön*—exaggerate the aberrations of the initial one; those of fifth degree are almost uniform; those of ninth degree become confused with those of the second; in those of the eleventh there is a purity of line not found in the original. The process is cyclical: the *brön* of twelfth degree begins to fall off in quality. Stranger and more pure than any *brön* is, at times, the *ur*: the object produced through suggestion, educed by hope. The great golden mask I have mentioned is an illustrious example.

Things become duplicated in Tlön; they also tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten. A classic example is the doorway which survived so long as it was visited by a beggar and disappeared at his death. At times some birds, a horse, have saved the ruins of an amphitheater.

Postscript (1947). I reproduce the preceding article just as it appeared in the *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1940), with no omission other than that of a few metaphors and a kind of sarcastic summary which now seems frivolous. So many things have happened since then . . . I shall do no more than recall them here.

In March of 1941 a letter written by Gunnar Erfjord was discovered in a book by Hinton which had belonged to Herbert Ashe. The envelope bore a cancellation from Ouro Preto; the letter completely elucidated the mystery of Tlön. Its text cor-

roborated the hypotheses of Martínez Estrada. One night in Lucerne or in London, in the early seventeenth century, the splendid history has its beginning. A secret and benevolent society (amongst whose members were Dalgarno and later George Berkeley) arose to invent a country. Its vague initial program included "hermetic studies," philanthropy and the cabala. From this first period dates the curious book by Andreä. After a few years of secret conclaves and premature syntheses it was understood that one generation was not sufficient to give articulate form to a country. They resolved that each of the masters should elect a disciple who would continue his work. This hereditary arrangement prevailed; after an interval of two centuries the persecuted fraternity sprang up again in America. In 1824, in Memphis (Tennessee), one of its affiliates conferred with the ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley. The latter, somewhat disdainfully, let him speak—and laughed at the plan's modest scope. He told the agent that in America it was absurd to invent a country and proposed the invention of a planet. To this gigantic idea he added another, a product of his nihilism:¹ that of keeping the enormous enterprise secret. At that time the twenty volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* were circulating in the United States; Buckley suggested that a methodical encyclopedia of the imaginary planet be written. He was to leave them his mountains of gold, his navigable rivers, his pasture lands roamed by cattle and buffalo, his Negroes, his brothels and his dollars, on one condition: "The work will make no pact with the impostor Jesus Christ." Buckley did not believe in God, but he wanted to demonstrate to this nonexistent God that mortal man was capable of conceiving a world. Buckley was poisoned in Baton Rouge in 1828; in 1914 the society delivered to its collaborators, some three hundred in number, the last volume of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. The edition was a secret one; its forty volumes (the vastest undertaking ever carried out by man) would be the basis for another more detailed edition, written not in English but in one of the languages of Tlön. This revision of an illusory world, was called, provisionally, *Orbis Tertius* and one of its modest demiurgi was Herbert Ashe, whether as an agent

¹ Buckley was a freethinker, a fatalist and a defender of slavery.

of Gunnar Erfjord or as an affiliate, I do not know. His having received a copy of the Eleventh Volume would seem to favor the latter assumption. But what about the others?

In 1942 events became more intense. I recall one of the first of these with particular clarity and it seems that I perceived then something of its premonitory character. It happened in an apartment on Laprida Street, facing a high and light balcony which looked out toward the sunset. Princess Faucigny Lucinge had received her silverware from Poitiers. From the vast depths of a box embellished with foreign stamps, delicate immobile objects emerged: silver from Utrecht and Paris covered with hard heraldic fauna, and a samovar. Amongst them—with the perceptible and tenuous tremor of a sleeping bird—a compass vibrated mysteriously. The Princess did not recognize it. Its blue needle longed for magnetic north; its metal case was concave in shape; the letters around its edge corresponded to one of the alphabets of Tlön. Such was the first intrusion of this fantastic world into the world of reality.

I am still troubled by a stroke of chance which made me the witness of the second intrusion as well. It happened some months later, at a country store owned by a Brazilian in Cuchilla Negra. Amorim and I were returning from Sant' Anna. The River Tacuarembó had flooded and we were obliged to sample (and endure) the proprietor's rudimentary hospitality. He provided us with some creaking cots in a large room cluttered with barrels and hides. We went to bed, but were kept from sleeping until dawn by the drunken ravings of an unseen neighbor, who intermingled inextricable insults with snatches of *milongas*—or rather with snatches of the same *milonga*. As might be supposed, we attributed this insistent uproar to the store owner's fiery cane liquor. By daybreak, the man was dead in the hallway. The roughness of his voice had deceived us: he was only a youth. In his delirium a few coins had fallen from his belt, along with a cone of bright metal, the size of a die. In vain a boy tried to pick up this cone. A man was scarcely able to raise it from the ground. I held it in my hand for a few minutes; I remember that its weight was intolerable and that after it was removed, the feeling of oppressiveness remained. I also remember the exact circle it

pressed into my palm. This sensation of a very small and at the same time extremely heavy object produced a disagreeable impression of repugnance and fear. One of the local men suggested we throw it into the swollen river; Amorim acquired it for a few pesos. No one knew anything about the dead man, except that "he came from the border." These small, very heavy cones (made from a metal which is not of this world) are images of the divinity in certain regions of Tlön.

Here I bring the personal part of my narrative to a close. The rest is in the memory (if not in the hopes or fears) of all my readers. Let it suffice for me to recall or mention the following facts, with a mere brevity of words which the reflective recollection of all will enrich or amplify. Around 1944, a person doing research for the newspaper *The American* (of Nashville, Tennessee) brought to light in a Memphis library the forty volumes of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Even today there is a controversy over whether this discovery was accidental or whether it was permitted by the directors of the still nebulous *Orbis Tertius*. The latter is most likely. Some of the incredible aspects of the Eleventh Volume (for example, the multiplication of the *brönir*) have been eliminated or attenuated in the Memphis copies; it is reasonable to imagine that these omissions follow the plan of exhibiting a world which is not too incompatible with the real world. The dissemination of objects from Tlön over different countries would complement this plan . . .¹ The fact is that the international press infinitely proclaimed the "find." Manuals, anthologies, summaries, literal versions, authorized re-editions and pirated editions of the Greatest Work of Man flooded and still flood the earth. Almost immediately, reality yielded on more than one account. The truth is that it longed to yield. Ten years ago any symmetry with a semblance of order—dialectical materialism, anti-Semitism, Nazism—was sufficient to entrance the minds of men. How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws—I translate: inhuman laws—which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth

¹ There remains, of course, the problem of the *material* of some objects.

devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men.

The contact and the habit of Tlön have disintegrated this world. Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels. Already the schools have been invaded by the (conjectural) "primitive language" of Tlön; already the teaching of its harmonious history (filled with moving episodes) has wiped out the one which governed in my childhood; already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing with certainty—not even that it is false. Numismatology, pharmacology and archaeology have been reformed. I understand that biology and mathematics also await their avatars . . . A scattered dynasty of solitary men has changed the face of the world. Their task continues. If our forecasts are not in error, a hundred years from now someone will discover the hundred volumes of the Second Encyclopedia of Tlön.

Then English and French and mere Spanish will disappear from the globe. The world will be Tlön. I pay no attention to all this and go on revising, in the still days at the Adrogué hotel, an uncertain Quevedian translation (which I do not intend to publish) of Browne's *Urn Burial*.

Translated by J. E. I.

The Garden of Forking Paths

On page 22 of Liddell Hart's *History of World War I* you will read that an attack against the Serre-Montauban line by thirteen British divisions (supported by 1,400 artillery pieces), planned for the 24th of July, 1916, had to be postponed until the morning of the 29th. The torrential rains, Captain Liddell Hart comments, caused this delay, an insignificant one, to be sure.

The following statement, dictated, reread and signed by Dr. Yu Tsun, former professor of English at the *Hochschule* at Tsingtao, throws an unsuspected light over the whole affair. The first two pages of the document are missing.

" . . . and I hung up the receiver. Immediately afterwards, I recognized the voice that had answered in German. It was that of Captain Richard Madden. Madden's presence in Viktor Runeberg's apartment meant the end of our anxieties and—but this seemed, *or should have seemed*, very secondary to me—also the end of our lives. It meant that Runeberg had been arrested or murdered.¹ Before the sun set on that day, I would encounter the same fate. Madden was implacable. Or rather, he was obliged to be so. An Irishman at the service of England, a man accused of laxity and perhaps of treason, how could he fail to seize and

¹ An hypothesis both hateful and odd. The Prussian spy Hans Rabener, alias Viktor Runeberg, attacked with drawn automatic the bearer of the warrant for his arrest, Captain Richard Madden. The latter, in self-defense, inflicted the wound which brought about Runeberg's death. (Editor's note.)

JORGE LUIS BORGES

The Garden of Forking Paths

Translated by Donald A. Yates

For Victoria Ocampo

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"... and I hung up the receiver. Immediately afterwards, I recognized the voice that had answered in German. It was that of Captain Richard Madden. Madden's presence in Viktor Runeberg's apartment meant the end of our anxieties and — but this seemed, or should have seemed, very secondary to me — also the end of our lives. It meant that Runeberg had been arrested or murdered.² Before the sun set on that day, I would encounter the same fate. Madden was implacable. Or rather, he was obliged to be so. An Irishman at the service of England, a man accused of laxity and perhaps of treason, how could he fail to seize and be thankful for such a miraculous opportunity: the discovery, capture, maybe even the death of two agents of the German Reich? I went up to my room; absurdly I locked the door and threw myself on my back on the narrow iron cot. Through the window I saw the familiar roofs and the cloud-shaded six o'clock sun. It seemed incredible to me that that day without premonitions or symbols should be the one of my inexorable death. In spite of my dead father, in spite of having been a child in a symmetrical garden of Hai Feng, was I — now — going to die? Then I reflected that everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening is happening to me... The almost intolerable recollection of Madden's horselike face banished these wanderings. In the midst of my hatred and terror (it means nothing to me now to speak of terror, now that I have mocked Richard Madden, now that my throat yearns for the noose) it occurred to me that that tumultuous and doubtless happy warrior did not suspect that I possessed the Secret. The name of the exact location

¹College or university (German).

²Arrested with drawn automatic the bearer of the warrant for his arrest, Captain Richard Madden. The latter, in self-defense, inflicted the wound which brought about Runeberg's death. (Borges's note)

of the new British artillery park on the River Ancre. A bird streaked across the gray sky and blindly I translated it into an airplane and that airplane into many (against the French sky) annihilating the artillery station with vertical bombs. If only my mouth, before a bullet shattered it, could cry out that secret name so it could be heard in Germany... My human voice was very weak. How might I make it carry to the ear of the Chief? To the ear of that sick and hateful man who knew nothing of Runeberg and me save that we were in Staffordshire and who was waiting in vain for our report in his arid office in Berlin, endlessly examining newspapers... I said out loud: *I must flee*. I sat up noiselessly, in a useless perfection of silence, as if Madden were already lying in wait for me. Something — perhaps the mere vain ostentation of proving my resources were nil — made me look through my pockets. I found what I knew I would find. The American watch, the nickel chain and the square coin, the key ring with the incriminating useless keys to Runeberg's apartment, the notebook, a letter which I resolved to destroy immediately (and which I did not destroy), a crown, two shillings and a few pence, the red and blue pencil, the handkerchief, the revolver with one bullet. Absurdly, I took it in my hand and weighed it in order to inspire courage within myself. Vaguely I thought that a pistol report can be heard at a great distance. In ten minutes my plan was perfected. The telephone book listed the name of the only person capable of transmitting the message; he lived in a suburb of Fenton, less than a half hour's train ride away.

I am a cowardly man. I say it now, now that I have carried to its end a plan whose perilous nature no one can deny. I know its execution was terrible. I didn't do it for Germany, no. I care nothing for a barbarous country which imposed upon me the abjection of being a spy. Besides, I know of a man from England — a modest man — who for me is no less great than Goethe. I talked with him for scarcely an hour, but during that hour he was Goethe... I did it because I sensed that the Chief somehow feared people of my race — for the innumerable ancestors who merge within me. I wanted to prove to him that a yellow man could save his armies. Besides, I had to flee from Captain Madden. His hands and his voice could call at my door at any moment. I dressed silently, bade farewell to myself in the mirror, went downstairs, scrutinized the peaceful street, and went out. The station was not far from my home, but I judged it wise to take a cab. I argued that in this way I ran less risk of being recognized; the fact is that in the deserted street I felt myself visible and vulnerable, infinitely so. I remember that I told the cab driver to stop a short distance before the main entrance. I got out with voluntary, almost painful slowness; I was going to the village of Ashgrove but I bought a ticket for a more distant station. The train left within a very few minutes, at eight-fifty. I hurried; the next one would leave at nine-thirty. There was hardly a soul on the platform. I went through the coaches; I remember a few farmers, a woman dressed in mourning, a young boy who was reading with fervor the *Annals of Tacitus*,³ a wounded and happy soldier. The coaches jerked forward at last. A

³The *Annals* (c. 116) is a history of the Roman emperors from Tiberius through Nero by Cornelius Tacitus (56–c. 120).

man who recognized ran in vain to the end of the platform. It was Captain Richard Madden. Shattered, trembling, I shrank into the far corner of the seat, away from the dreaded window.

From this broken state I passed into an almost abject felicity. I told myself that the duel had already begun and that I had won the first encounter by frustrating, even if for forty minutes, even if by a stroke of fate, the attack of my adversary. I argued that this slightest of victories foreshadowed a total victory. I argued (no less fallaciously) that my cowardly felicity proved that I was a man capable of carrying out the adventure successfully. From this weakness I took strength that did not abandon me. I foresee that man will resign himself each day to more atrocious undertakings; soon there will be no one but warriors and brigands; I give them this counsel: *The author of an atrocious undertaking ought to imagine that he has already accomplished it, ought to impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past.* Thus I proceeded as my eyes of a man already dead registered the elapsing of that day, which was perhaps the last, and the diffusion of the night. The train ran gently along, amid ash trees. It stopped, almost in the middle of the fields. No one announced the name of the station. "Ashgrove?" I asked a few lads on the platform. "Ashgrove," they replied. I got off.

A lamp enlightened the platform but the faces of the boys were in shadow. One questioned me, "Are you going to Dr. Stephen Albert's house?" Without waiting for my answer, another said, "The house is a long way from here, but you won't get lost if you take this road to the left and at every cross-roads turn again to your left." I tossed them a coin (my last), descended a few stone steps, and started down the solitary road. It went downhill, slowly. It was of elemental earth; overhead the branches were tangled; the low, full moon seemed to accompany me.

For an instant, I thought that Richard Madden in some way had penetrated my desperate plan. Very quickly, I understood that that was impossible. The instructions to turn always to the left reminded me that such was the common procedure for discovering the central point of certain labyrinths. I have some understanding of labyrinths: not for nothing am I the great grandson of that Ts'ui Pên who was governor of Yunnan and who renounced worldly power in order to write a novel that might be even more populous than the *Hung Lu Meng*⁴ and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost. Thirteen years he dedicated to these heterogeneous tasks, but the hand of a stranger murdered him — and his novel was incoherent and no one found the labyrinth. Beneath English trees I meditated on that lost maze: I imagined it inviolate and perfect at the secret crest of a mountain; I imagined it erased by rice fields or beneath the water; I imagined it infinite, no longer composed of octagonal kiosks and returning paths, but of rivers and provinces and kingdoms... I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading

⁴*Dream of the Red Chamber* by Ts'ao Chan contains over four hundred characters. Published in 1791, its faithful representation of upper-class life and character profiles is considered unsurpassed in Chinese literature.

labyrinth that would encompass the past and the future. In some way involve the stars. Absorbed in these illusory images, I forgot my destiny of one pursued. I felt myself to be, for an unknown period of time, an abstract perceiver of the world. The vague, living countryside, the moon, the remains of the day worked on me, as well as the slope of the road which eliminated any possibility of weariness. The afternoon was intimate, infinite. The road descended and forked among the now confused meadows. A high-pitched, almost syllabic music approached and receded in the shifting of the wind, dimmed by leaves and distance. I thought that a man can be an enemy of other men, of the moments of other men, but not of a country: not of fireflies, words, gardens, streams of water, sunsets. Thus I arrived before a tall, rusty gate. Between the iron bars I made out a poplar grove and a pavilion. I understood suddenly two things, the first trivial, the second almost unbelievable: the music came from the pavilion, and the music was Chinese. For precisely that reason I had openly accepted it without paying it any heed. I do not remember whether there was a bell or whether I knocked with my hand. The sparkling of the music continued.

From the rear of the house within a lantern approached: a lantern that the trees sometimes striped and sometimes eclipsed, a paper lantern that had the form of a drum and the color of the moon. A tall man bore it. I didn't see his face for the light blinded me. He opened the door and said slowly, in my own language: "I see that the pious Hsi P'êng persists in correcting my solitude. You no doubt wish to see the garden?"

I recognized the name of one of our consuls and I replied, disconcerted, "The garden?"

"The garden of forking paths."

Something stirred in my memory and I uttered with incomprehensible certainty, "The garden of my ancestor Ts'ui Pên."

"Your ancestor? Your illustrious ancestor? Come in."

The damp path zigzagged like those of my childhood. We came to a library of Eastern and Western books. I recognized bound in yellow silk several volumes of the *Lost Encyclopedia*, edited by the Third Emperor of the Luminous Dynasty but never printed. The record on the phonograph revolved next to a bronze phoenix. I also recall a *famille rose*⁵ vase and another, many centuries older, of that shade of blue which our craftsmen copied from the potters of Persia...

Stephen Albert observed me with a smile. He was, as I have said, very tall, sharp-featured, with gray eyes and a gray beard. He told me that he had been a missionary in Tientsin "before aspiring to become a Sinologist."

We sat down — I on a long, low divan, he with his back to the window and a tall circular clock. I calculated that my pursuer, Richard Madden, could not arrive for at least an hour. My irrevocable determination could wait.

"An astounding fate, that of Ts'ui Pên," Stephen Albert said. "Governor of his native province, learned in astronomy, in astrology, and in the tireless

⁵Chinese porcelain decorated primarily with the color rose.

interpretation of the canonical books, chess player, famous poet and calligrapher — he abandoned all this in order to compose a book and a maze. He renounced the pleasures of both tyranny and justice, of his populous couch, of his banquets, and even of erudition — all to close himself up for thirteen years in the Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude. When he died, his heirs found nothing save chaotic manuscripts. His family, as you may be aware, wished to condemn them to the fire; but his executor — a Taoist or Buddhist monk — insisted on their publication."

"We descendants of Ts'ui Pên," I replied, "continue to curse that monk. Their publication was senseless. The book is an indeterminate heap of contradictory drafts. I examined it once: in the third chapter the hero dies, in the fourth he is alive. As for the other undertaking of Ts'ui Pên, his labyrinth . . ."

"Here is Ts'ui Pên's labyrinth," he said, indicating a tall lacquered desk.

"An ivory labyrinth!" I exclaimed. "A minimum labyrinth."

"A labyrinth of symbols," he corrected. "An invisible labyrinth of time.

To me, a barbarous Englishman, has been entrusted the revelation of this diaphanous mystery. After more than a hundred years, the details are irretrievable; but it is not hard to conjecture what happened. Ts'ui Pên must have said once: *I am withdrawing to write a book*. And another time: *I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth*. Every one imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing. The Pavilion of the Limpid Solitude stood in the center of a garden that was perhaps intricate; that circumstance could have suggested to the heirs a physical labyrinth. Ts'ui Pên died; no one in the vast territories that were his came upon the labyrinth; the confusion of the novel suggested to me that it was the maze. Two circumstances gave me the correct solution of the problem. One: the curious legend that Ts'ui Pên had planned to create a labyrinth which would be strictly infinite. The other: a fragment of a letter I discovered."

Albert rose. He turned his back on me for a moment; he opened a drawer of the black and gold desk. He faced me and in his hands he held a sheet of paper that had once been crimson, but was now pink and tenuous and cross-sectioned. The fame of Ts'ui Pên as a calligrapher had been justly won. I read, uncomprehendingly and with fervor, these words written with a minute brush by a man of my blood: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Wordlessly, I returned the sheet. Albert continued:

"Before unearthing this letter, I had questioned myself about the ways in which a book can be infinite. I could think of nothing other than a cyclic volume, a circular one. A book whose last page was identical with the first, a book which had the possibility of continuing indefinitely. I remembered too that night which is at the middle of the Thousand and One Nights⁶ when Scheherazade (through a magical oversight of the copyist) begins to relate word for word the story of the Thousand and One Nights, establishing the risk of coming once again to the night when she must repeat it, and thus on to infinity. I

⁶Or *Arabian Nights* is a collection of tales supposedly narrated by Scheherazade to her husband, Sultan, each night in exchange for another day of life.

imagined as well a Platonic, hereditary work, transmitted from father to son, in which each new individual adds a chapter or corrects with pious care the pages of his elders. These conjectures diverted me; but none seemed to correspond, not even remotely, to the contradictory chapters of Ts'ui Pên. In the midst of this perplexity, I received from Oxford the manuscript you have examined. I lingered, naturally, on the sentence: *I leave to the various futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths*. Almost instantly, I understood: 'the garden of forking paths' was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'the various futures (not to all)' suggested to me the forking in time, not in space. A broad rereading of the work confirmed the theory. In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of Ts'ui Pên, he chooses — simultaneously — all of them. *He creates*, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork. Here, then, is the explanation of the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger calls at his door; Fang resolves to kill him. Naturally, there are several possible outcomes: Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they both can escape, they both can die, and so forth. In the work of Ts'ui Pên, all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings. Sometimes, the paths of this labyrinth converge: for example, you arrive at this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend. If you will resign yourself to my incurable pronunciation, we shall read a few pages."

23 His face, within the vivid circle of the lamplight, was unquestionably that of an old man, but with something unalterable about it, even immortal. He read with slow precision two versions of the same epic chapter. In the first, an army marches to a battle across a lonely mountain; the horror of the rocks and shadows makes the men undervalue their lives and they gain an easy victory. In the second, the same army traverses a palace where a great festival is taking place; the resplendent battle seems to them a continuation of the celebration and they win the victory. I listened with proper veneration to these ancient narratives, perhaps less admirable in themselves than the fact that they had been created by my blood and were being restored to me by a man of a remote empire, in the course of a desperate adventure, on a Western isle. I remember the last words, repeated in each version like a secret commandment: *Thus fought the heroes, tranquil their admirable hearts, violent their swords, resigned to kill and to die*.

24 From that moment on, I felt about me and within my dark body an invisible, intangible swarming. Not the swarming of the divergent, parallel, and finally coalescent armies, but a more inaccessible, more intimate agitation that they in some manner prefigured. Stephen Albert continued:

25 "I don't believe that your illustrious ancestor played idly with these variations. I don't consider it credible that he would sacrifice thirteen years to the infinite execution of a rhetorical experiment. In your country, the novel is a subsidiary form of literature; in Ts'ui Pên's time it was a despicable form. Ts'ui Pên was a brilliant novelist, but he was also a man of letters who doubtless did not consider himself a mere novelist. The testimony of his contemporaries proclaims — and his life fully confirms — his metaphysical and mystical

interest. Philosophic controversy usurps a good part of the novel. I know that of all problems, none disturbed him so greatly nor worked upon him so much as the abysmal problem of time. Now then, the latter is the only problem that does not figure in the pages of the *Garden*. He does not even use the word that signifies *time*. How do you explain this voluntary omission?"

I proposed several solutions — all unsatisfactory. We discussed them. Finally, Stephen Albert said to me: 26

"In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only prohibited word?" 27

I thought a moment and replied: "The word *chess*." 28

"Precisely," said Albert. "*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention. To omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it. That is the tortuous method preferred, in each of the meanderings of his indefatigable novel, by the oblique Ts'ui Pên. I have compared hundreds of manuscripts, I have corrected the errors that the negligence of the copyists has introduced, I have guessed the plan of this chaos, I have re-established — I believe I have re-established — the primordial organization, I have translated the entire work: it is clear to me that not once does he employ the word 'time.' The explanation is obvious: *The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts'ui Pên conceived it. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent, and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us. In the present one, which a favorable fate has granted me, you have arrived at my house; in another, while crossing the garden, you found me dead; in still another, I utter these same words, but I am a mistake, a ghost." 29

"In every one," I pronounced, not without a tremble to my voice, "I am grateful to you and revere you for your re-creation of the garden of Ts'ui Pên." 30

"Not in all," he murmured with a smile. "Time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy." 31

Once again I felt the swarming sensation of which I have spoken. It seemed to me that the humid garden that surrounded the house was infinitely saturated with invisible persons. Those persons were Albert and I, secret, busy, and multiform in other dimensions of time. I raised my eyes and the tenuous nightmare dissolved. In the yellow and black garden there was only one man; but this man was as strong as a statue . . . this man was approaching along the path and he was Captain Richard Madden. 32

"The future already exists," I replied, "but I am your friend. Could I see the letter again?" 33

Albert rose. Standing tall, he opened the drawer of the tall desk; for the moment his back was to me. I had readied the revolver. I fired with extreme caution. Albert fell uncomplainingly, immediately. I swear his death was instantaneous — a lightning stroke. 34

The rest is unreal, insignificant. Madden broke in, arrested me. I have been condemned to the gallows. I have won out abominably; I have communicated to Berlin the secret name of the city they must attack. They bombed it yesterday; I read it in the same papers that offered to England the mystery of the learned Sinologist Stephen Albert who was murdered by a stranger, one Yu Tsun. The Chief had deciphered this mystery. He knew my problem was to indicate (through the uproar of the war) the city called Albert, and that I had found no other means to do so than to kill a man of that name. He does not know (no one can know) my innumerable contrition and weariness. [1941]

with his environment or with others. In this case there was the young girl with a young girl's normal aspirations to find love and then a husband and a family, who was brow-beaten and kept down by her father, a selfish man who didn't want her to leave home because he wanted a housekeeper, and it was a natural instinct of—repressed which—you can't repress it—you can mash it down but it comes up somewhere else and very likely in a tragic form, and that was simply another manifestation of man's injustice to man, of the poor tragic human being struggling with its own simple things which all human beings just wanted to be loved and to

Q. And that purely came from

A. Well, the story did but that condition, I didn't invent love and children and a home, but the story of what her own particular tragedy was was invented, yes. . . .

Q. Sir, it has been argued that "A Rose for Emily" is a criticism of the North, and others have argued saying that it is a criticism of the South. Now, could this story, shall we say, be more properly classified as a criticism of the times?

A. Now that I don't know, because I was simply trying to write about people. The writer uses environment—what he knows—and if there's a symbolism in which the lover represented the North and the woman who murdered him represents the South, I don't say that's not valid and not there, but it was no intention of the writer to say, Now let's see, I'm going to write a piece in which I will use a symbolism for the North and another symbol for the South, that he was simply writing about people, a story which he thought was tragic and true, because it came out of the human heart, the human aspiration, the human—the conflict of conscience with glands, with the Old Adam. It was a conflict not between North and the South so much as between, well you might say, God and Satan.

Q. Sir, just a little more on that thing. You say it's a conflict between God and Satan. Well, I don't quite understand what you mean. Who is—did one represent the—

A. The conflict was in Miss Emily, that she knew that you do not murder people. She had been trained that you do not take a lover. You marry, you don't take a lover. She had broken all the laws of her tradition, her background, and she had finally broken the law of God too, which says you do not take human life. And she knew she was doing wrong, and that's why her own life was wrecked. Instead of murdering one lover, and then to go and take another and when she used him up to murder him, she was expiating her crime.

Q. Was the "Rose for Emily" an idea or a character? Just how did you go about it?

A. That came from a picture of the strand of hair on the pillow. It was a ghost story. Simply a picture of a strand of hair on the pillow in the abandoned house.

From *Faulkner in the University*, edited by Frederick Gwynn and Joseph Blotner

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

Discuss whether you think Faulkner's explanation of the conflict between "God and Satan" limits or expands the meaning of the story for you.

2. In what sense is "A Rose for Emily" a ghost story?
3. Compare Faulkner's account of how he conceived "A Rose for Emily" with Flannery O'Connor's description of "Good Country People" in the Perspective on page 392. To what extent are their attitudes about symbolism similar?

ANDRE DUBUS (b. 1936)

Though a native of Louisiana, where he attended the Christian Brothers School and McNeese State College, Andre Dubus has lived much of his life in Massachusetts; many of his stories are set in the Merrimack Valley north of Boston. After college Dubus served as an officer for five years in the Marine Corps. He then took an M.F.A. at the University of Iowa in 1966 and began teaching at Bradford College in Massachusetts. His fiction has earned him numerous awards, and he has been both a Guggenheim and a MacArthur Fellow. Among his collections of fiction are *Separate Flights* (1975), *Adultery and Other Choices* (1977), *Finding a Girl in America* (1980), from which "Killings" is taken, *The Last Worthless Evening* (1986), *Collected Stories* (1988), and *Dancing After Hours* (1996). In 1991 he published *Broken Vessels*, a collection of autobiographical essays. His fictions are often tense with violence, anger, tenderness, and guilt; they are populated by characters who struggle to understand and survive their experiences, painful with failure and the weight of imperfect relationships. In "Killings" Dubus offers a powerful blend of intimate domestic life and shocking violence.

Killings

1979

On the August morning when Matt Fowler buried his youngest son, Frank, who had lived for twenty-one years, eight months, and four days, Matt's older son, Steve, turned to him as the family left the grave and walked between their friends, and said: "I should kill him." He was twenty-eight, his brown hair starting to thin in front where he used to have a cowlick. He bit his lower lip, wiped his eyes, then said it again. Ruth's arm, linked with Matt's, tightened; he looked at her. Beneath her eyes there was swelling from the three days she had suffered. At the limousine Matt stopped and looked back at the grave, the casket, and the Congregationalist minister who he thought had probably had a difficult job with the eulogy though he hadn't seemed to, and the old funeral director who was saying something to the six young pallbearers. The grave was on a hill and overlooked the Merrimack, which he could not see from where he stood; he looked at the opposite bank, at the apple orchard with its symmetrically planted trees going up a hill.

Next day Steve drove with his wife back to Baltimore where he managed the branch office of a bank, and Cathleen, the middle child, drove with her husband back to Syracuse. They had left the grandchildren with friends. A

monti. After the funeral Matt played poker at Willis Trotter's because Ruth, who knew this was the second time he had been invited, told him to go, he couldn't sit home with her for the rest of her life, she was all right. After the game Willis went outside to tell everyone good night and, when the others had driven away, he walked with Matt to his car. Willis was a short, silver-haired man who had opened a diner after World War II, his trade then mostly very early breakfast, which he cooked, and then lunch for the men who worked at the leather and shoe factories. He now owned a large restaurant.

"He walks the Goddamn streets," Matt said.

"I know. He was in my place last night, at the bar. With a girl."

"I don't see him. I'm in the store all the time. Ruth sees him. She sees him too much. She was at Sunnyhurst today getting cigarettes and aspirin, and there he was. She can't even go out for cigarettes and aspirin. It's killing her."

"Come back in for a drink."

Matt looked at his watch. Ruth would be asleep. He walked with Willis back into the house, pausing at the steps to look at the starlit sky. It was a cool summer night; he thought vaguely of the Red Sox, did not even know if they were at home tonight; since it happened he had not been able to think about any of the small pleasures he believed he had earned, as he had earned also what was shattered now forever: the quietly harried and quietly pleasurable days of fatherhood. They went inside. Willis's wife, Martha, had gone to bed hours ago, in the rear of the large house which was rigged with burglar and fire alarms. They went downstairs to the game room: the television set suspended from the ceiling, the pool table, the poker table with beer cans, cards, chips, filled ashtrays, and the six chairs where Matt and his friends had sat, the friends picking up the old banter as though he had only been away on vacation; but he could see the affection and courtesy in their eyes. Willis went behind the bar and mixed them each a Scotch and soda; he stayed behind the bar and looked at Matt sitting on the stool.

"How often have you thought about it?" Willis said.

"Every day since he got out. I didn't think about bail. I thought I wouldn't have to worry about him for years. She sees him all the time. It makes her cry."

"He was in my place a long time last night. He'll be back."

"Maybe he won't."

"The band. He likes the band."

"What's he doing now?"

"He's tending bar up to Hampton Beach. For a friend. Ever notice even the worst bastard always has friends? He couldn't get work in town. It's just tourists and kids up to Hampton. Nobody knows him. If they do, they don't care. They drink what he mixes."

"Nobody tells me about him."

"I hate him, Matt. My boys went to school with him. He was the same then. Know what he'll do? Five at the most. Remember that woman about seven years ago? Shot her husband and dropped him off the bridge in the Merimack with a hundred-pound sack of cement and said all the way through it that nobody helped her. Know where she is now? She's in Lawrence now, a secretary. And whoever helped her, where the hell is he?"

"I've got a .38 I've had for years, I take it to the store now. I tell Ruth it's for the night deposits. I tell her things have changed: we got junkies here now too. Lots of people without jobs. She knows though."

"What does she know?"

"She knows I started carrying it after the first time she saw him in town. She knows it's in case I see him, and there's some kind of a situation —"

He stopped, looked at Willis, and finished his drink. Willis mixed him another.

"What kind of situation?"

"Where he did something to me. Where I could get away with it."

"How does Ruth feel about that?"

"She doesn't know."

"You said she does, she's got it figured out."

He thought of her that afternoon: when she went into Sunnyhurst, Strout was waiting at the counter while the clerk bagged the things he had bought; she turned down an aisle and looked at soup cans until he left.

"Ruth would shoot him herself, if she thought she could hit him."

"You got a permit?"

"No."

"I do. You could get a year for that."

"Maybe I'll get one. Or maybe I won't. Maybe I'll just stop bringing it to the store."

Richard Strout was twenty-six years old, a high school athlete, football scholarship to the University of Massachusetts where he lasted for almost two semesters before quitting in advance of the final grades that would have forced him not to return. People then said: Dickie can do the work; he just doesn't want to. He came home and did construction work for his father but refused his father's offer to learn the business; his two older brothers had learned it, so that Strout and Sons trucks going about town, and signs on construction sites, now slashed wounds into Matt Fowler's life. Then Richard married a young girl and became a bartender, his salary and tips augmented and perhaps sometimes matched by his father, who also posted his bond. So his friends, his enemies (he had those: fist fights or, more often, boys and then young men who had not fought him when they thought they should have), and those who simply knew him by face and name, had a series of images of him which they recalled when they heard of the killing: the high school running back, the young drunk in bars, the oblivious hard-hatted young man eating lunch at a counter, the bartender who could perhaps be called courteous but not more than that: as he tended bar, his dark eyes and dark, wide-jawed face appeared less sullen, near blank.

One night he beat Frank. Frank was living at home and waiting for September, for graduate school in economics, and working as a lifeguard at Salisbury Beach, where he met Mary Ann Strout, in her first month of separation. She spent most days at the beach with her two sons. Before ten o'clock one night Frank came home; he had driven to the hospital first, and he walked into the living room with stitches over his right eye and both lips bright and swollen.

"I'm all right," he said, when Matt and Ruth stood up, and Matt turned off the television, letting Ruth get to him first: the tall, muscled but slender suntanned boy. Frank tried to smile at them but couldn't because of his lips.

"It was her husband, wasn't it?" Ruth said.

"Ex," Frank said. "He dropped in."

Matt gently held Frank's jaw and turned his face to the light, looked at the stitches, the blood under the white of the eye, the bruised flesh.

"Press charges," Matt said.

"No."

"What's to stop him from doing it again? Did you hit him at all? Enough so he won't want to next time?" 40

"I don't think I touched him."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Take karate," Frank said, and tried again to smile.

"That's not the problem," Ruth said.

"You know you like her," Frank said.

"I like a lot of people. What about the boys? Did they see it?" 45

"They were asleep."

"Did you leave her alone with him?"

"He left first. She was yelling at him. I believe she had a skillet in her hand."

"Oh for God's sake," Ruth said. 50

Matt had been dealing with that too: at the dinner table on evenings when Frank wasn't home, was eating with Mary Ann; or, on the other nights — and Frank was with her every night — he talked with Ruth while they watched television, or lay in bed with the windows open and he smelled the night air and imagined, with both pride and muted sorrow, Frank in Mary Ann's arms. Ruth didn't like it because Mary Ann was in the process of divorce, because she had two children, because she was four years older than Frank, and finally — she told this in bed, where she had during all of their marriage told him of her deepest feelings: of love, of passion, of fears about one of the children, of pain Matt had caused her or she had caused him — she was against it because of what she had heard: that the marriage had gone bad early, and for most of it Richard and Mary Ann had both played around.

"That can't be true," Matt said. "Strout wouldn't have stood for it."

"Maybe he loves her."

"He's too hot-tempered. He couldn't have taken that."

But Matt knew Strout had taken it, for he had heard the stories too. He wondered who had told them to Ruth; and he felt vaguely annoyed and isolated: living with her for thirty-one years and still not knowing what she talked about with her friends. On these summer nights he did not so much argue with her as try to comfort her, but finally there was no difference between the two: she had concrete objections, which he tried to overcome. And in his attempt to do this, he neglected his own objections, which were the same as hers, so that as he spoke to her he felt as disembodied as he sometimes did in the store when he helped a man choose a blouse or dress or piece of costume jewelry for his wife.

"The divorce doesn't mean anything," he said. "She was young and maybe she liked his looks and then after a while she realized she was living with a bastard. I see it as a positive thing."

"She's not divorced yet."

"It's the same thing. Massachusetts has crazy laws, that's all. Her age is no problem. What's it matter when she was born? And that other business: even if it's true — which it probably isn't, it's got nothing to do with Frank, and it's in the past. ... and the kids are no problem. She's been married six years; she ought

to have kids. Frank likes them. He plays with them. And he's not going to marry her anyway, so it's not a problem of money."

"Then what's he doing with her?"

"She probably loves him, Ruth. Girls always have. Why can't we just leave it at that?" 60

"He got home at six o'clock Tuesday morning."

"I didn't know you knew. I've already talked to him about it."

Which he had: since he believed almost nothing he told Ruth, he went to Frank with what he believed. The night before, he had followed Frank to the car after dinner.

"You wouldn't make much of a burglar," he said.

"How's that?" 65

Matt was looking up at him; Frank was six feet tall, an inch and a half taller than Matt, who had been proud when Frank at seventeen outgrew him; he had only felt uncomfortable when he had to reprimand or caution him. He touched Frank's bicep, thought of the young taut passionate body, believed he could sense the desire, and again he felt the pride and sorrow and envy too, not knowing whether he was envious of Frank or Mary Ann.

"When you came in yesterday morning, I woke up. One of these mornings your mother will. And I'm the one who'll have to talk to her. She won't interfere with you. Okay? I know it means —" But he stopped, thinking: I know it means getting up and leaving that suntanned girl and going sleepy to the car, I know —

"Okay," Frank said, and touched Matt's shoulder and got into the car.

There had been other talks, but the only long one was their first one: a night driving to Fenway Park, Matt having ordered the tickets so they could talk, and knowing when Frank said yes, he would go, that he knew the talk was coming too. It took them forty minutes to get to Boston, and they talked about Mary Ann until they joined the city traffic along the Charles River, blue in the late sun. Frank told him all the things that Matt would later pretend to believe when he told them to Ruth.

"It seems like a lot for a young guy to take on," Matt finally said. 70

"Sometimes it is. But she's worth it."

"Are you thinking about getting married?"

"We haven't talked about it. She can't for over a year. I've got school."

"I *do* like her," Matt said.

He did. Some evenings, when the long summer sun was still low in the sky, Frank brought her home; they came into the house smelling of suntan lotion and the sea, and Matt gave them gin and tonics and started the charcoal in the backyard, and looked at Mary Ann in the lawn chair: long and very light brown hair (Matt thinking that twenty years ago she would have dyed it blonde), and the long brown legs he loved to look at; her face was pretty; she had probably never in her adult life gone unnoticed into a public place. It was in her wide brown eyes that she looked older than Frank; after a few drinks Matt thought what he saw in her eyes was something erotic, testament to the rumors about her; but he knew it wasn't that, or all that: she had, very young, been through a sort of pain that his children, and he and Ruth, had been spared. In the moments of his recognizing that pain, he wanted to tenderly touch her hair, wanted with some gesture to give her solace and hope. And he'd glance at Frank, and hope they would love each other, hope Frank would soothe that

pain in her heart, take it from her eyes; and her divorce, her age, and her children did not matter at all. On the first two evenings she did not bring her boys, and then Ruth asked her to bring them the next time. In bed that night Ruth said, "She hasn't brought them because she's embarrassed. She shouldn't feel embarrassed."

Richard Strout shot Frank in front of the boys. They were sitting on the living room floor watching television, Frank sitting on the couch, and Mary Ann just returning from the kitchen with a tray of sandwiches. Strout came in the front door and shot Frank twice in the chest and once in the face with a 9 mm automatic. Then he looked at the boys and Mary Ann, and went home to wait for the police.

It seemed to Matt that from the time Mary Ann called weeping to tell him until now, a Saturday night in September, sitting in the car with Willis, parked beside Strout's car, waiting for the bar to close, that he had not so much moved through his life as wandered through it, his spirits like a dazed body bumping into furniture and corners. He had always been a fearful father: when his children were young, at the start of each summer he thought of them drowning in a pond or the sea, and he was relieved when he came home in the evenings and they were there; usually that relief was his only acknowledgment of his fear, which he never spoke of, and which he controlled within his heart. As he had when they were very young and all of them in turn, Cathleen too, were drawn to the high oak in the backyard, and had to climb it. Smiling, he watched them, imagining the fall: and he was poised to catch the small body before it hit the earth. Or his legs were poised; his hands were in his pockets or his arms were folded and, for the child looking down, he appeared relaxed and confident while his heart beat with the two words he wanted to call out but did not: *Don't fall*. In winter he was less afraid: he made sure the ice would hold him before they skated, and he brought or sent them to places where they could sled without ending in the street. So he and his children had survived their childhood, and he only worried about them when he knew they were driving a long distance, and then he lost Frank in a way no father expected to lose his son, and he felt that all the fears he had borne while they were growing up, and all the grief he had been afraid of, had backed up like a huge wave and struck him on the beach and swept him out to sea. Each day he felt the same and when he was able to forget how he felt, when he was able to force himself not to feel that way, the eyes of his clerks and customers defeated him. He wished those eyes were oblivious, even cold; he felt he was withering in their tenderness. And beneath his listless wandering, every day in his soul he shot Richard Strout in the face; while Ruth, going about town on errands, kept seeing him. And at nights in bed she would hold Matt and cry, or sometimes she was silent and Matt would touch her tightening arm, her clenched fist.

As his own right fist was now, squeezing the butt of the revolver, the last of the drinkers having left the bar, talking to each other, going to their separate cars which were in the lot in front of the bar, out of Matt's vision. He heard their voices, their cars, and then the ocean again, across the street. The tide was in and sometimes it smacked the sea wall. Through the windshield he looked at the dark red side wall of the bar, and then to his left, past Willis, at Strout's car, and through its windows he could see the now-emptied parking lot, the road, the sea wall. He could smell the sea.

The front door of the bar opened and closed again and Willis looked at Matt then at the corner of the building; when Strout came around it alone Matt got out of the car, giving up the hope he had kept all night (and for the past week) that Strout would come out with friends, and Willis would simply drive away; thinking: *All right then. All right*; and he went around the front of Willis's car, and at Strout's he stopped and aimed over the hood at Strout's blue shirt ten feet away. Willis was aiming too, crouched on Matt's left, his elbow resting on the hood.

"Mr. Fowler," Strout said. He looked at each of them, and at the guns. 80
"Mr. Trotter."

Then Matt, watching the parking lot and the road, walked quickly between the car and the building and stood behind Strout. He took one leather glove from his pocket and put it on his left hand.

"Don't talk. Unlock the front and back and get in."

Strout unlocked the front door, reached in and unlocked the back, then got in, and Matt slid into the back seat, closed the door with his gloved hand, and touched Strout's head once with the muzzle.

"It's cocked. Drive to your house."

When Strout looked over his shoulder to back the car, Matt aimed at his 85 temple and did not look at his eyes.

"Drive slowly," he said. "Don't try to get stopped."

They drove across the empty front lot and onto the road, Willis's headlights shining into the car; then back through town, the sea wall on the left hiding the beach, though far out Matt could see the ocean; he uncocked the revolver; on the right were the places, most with their neon signs off, that did so much business in summer: the lounges and cafés and pizza houses, the street itself empty of traffic, the way he and Willis had known it would be when they decided to take Strout at the bar rather than knock on his door at two o'clock one morning and risk that one insomniac neighbor. Matt had not told Willis he was afraid he could not be alone with Strout for very long, smell his smells, feel the presence of his flesh, hear his voice, and then shoot him. They left the beach town and then were on the high bridge over the channel: to the left the smacking curling white at the breakwater and beyond that the dark sea and the full moon, and down to his right the small fishing boats bobbing at anchor in the cove. When they left the bridge, the sea was blocked by abandoned beach cottages, and Matt's left hand was sweating in the glove. Out here in the dark in the car he believed Ruth knew. Willis had come to his house at eleven and asked if he wanted a nightcap; Matt went to the bedroom for his wallet, put the gloves in one trouser pocket and the .38 in the other and went back to the living room, his hand in his pocket covering the bulge of the cool cylinder pressed against his fingers, the butt against his palm. When Ruth said good night she looked at his face, and he felt she could see in his eyes the gun, and the night he was going to. But he knew he couldn't trust what he saw. Willis's wife had taken her sleeping pill, which gave her eight hours — the reason, Willis had told Matt, he had the alarms installed, for nights when he was late at the restaurant — and when it was all done and Willis got home he would leave ice and a trace of Scotch and soda in two glasses in the game room and tell Martha in the morning that he had left the restaurant early and brought Matt home for a drink.

"He was making it with my wife." Strout's voice was careful, not pleading.

Matt pressed the muzzle against Strout's head, pressed it harder than he wanted to, feeling through the gun Strout's head flinching and moving forward; then he lowered the gun to his lap.

"Don't talk," he said.

90

Strout did not speak again. They turned west, drove past the Dairy Queen closed until spring, and the two lobster restaurants that faced each other and were crowded all summer and were now also closed, onto the short bridge crossing the tidal stream, and over the engine Matt could hear through his open window the water rushing inland under the bridge; looking to his left he saw its swift moonlit current going back into the marsh which, leaving the bridge, they entered: the salt marsh stretching out on both sides, the grass tall in patches but mostly low and leaning earthward as though windblown, a large dark rock sitting as though it rested on nothing but itself, and shallow pools reflecting the bright moon.

Beyond the marsh they drove through woods, Matt thinking now of the hole he and Willis had dug last Sunday afternoon after telling their wives they were going to Fenway Park. They listened to the game on a transistor radio, but heard none of it as they dug into the soft earth on the knoll they had chosen because elms and maples sheltered it. Already some leaves had fallen. When the hole was deep enough they covered it and the piled earth with dead branches, then cleaned their shoes and pants and went to a restaurant farther up in New Hampshire where they ate sandwiches and drank beer and watched the rest of the game on television. Looking at the back of Strout's head he thought of Frank's grave; he had not been back to it; but he would go before winter, and its second burial of snow.

He thought of Frank sitting on the couch and perhaps talking to the children as they watched television, imagined him feeling young and strong, still warmed from the sun at the beach, and feeling loved, hearing Mary Ann moving about in the kitchen, hearing her walking into the living room; maybe he looked up at her and maybe she said something, looking at him over the tray of sandwiches, smiling at him, saying something the way women do when they offer food as a gift, then the front door opening and this son of a bitch coming in and Frank seeing that he meant the gun in his hand, this son of a bitch and his gun the last person and thing Frank saw on earth.

When they drove into town the streets were nearly empty: a few slow cars, a policeman walking his beat past the darkened fronts of stores. Strout and Matt both glanced at him as they drove by. They were on the main street, and all the stoplights were blinking yellow. Willis and Matt had talked about that too: the lights changed at midnight, so there would be no place Strout had to stop and where he might try to run. Strout turned down the block where he lived and Willis's headlights were no longer with Matt in the back seat. They had planned that too, had decided it was best for just the one car to go to the house, and again Matt had said nothing about his fear of being alone with Strout, especially in his house: a duplex, dark as all the houses on the street were, the street itself lit at the corner of each block. As Strout turned into the driveway Matt thought of the one insomniac neighbor, thought of some man or woman sitting alone in the dark living room, watching the all-night channel from Boston. When Strout stopped the car near the front of the house, Matt said: "Drive it to the back."

He pressed Strout's head with the muzzle.

91

"You wouldn't have it cocked, would you? For when I put on the brakes."

Matt cocked it, and said: "It is now."

Strout waited a moment; then he eased the car forward, the engine doing little more than idling, and as they approached the garage he gently braked. Matt opened the door, then took off the glove and put it in his pocket. He stepped out and shut the door with his hip and said: "All right."

Strout looked at the gun, then got out, and Matt followed him across the grass, and as Strout unlocked the door Matt looked quickly at the row of small backyards on either side, and scattered tall trees, some evergreens, others not, and he thought of the red and yellow leaves on the trees over the hole, saw them falling soon, probably in two weeks, dropping slowly, covering. Strout stepped into the kitchen.

"Turn on the light."

100

Strout reached to the wall switch, and in the light Matt looked at his wide back, the dark blue shirt, the white belt, the red plaid pants.

"Where's your suitcase?"

"My suitcase?"

"Where is it?"

"In the bedroom closet."

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"That's where we're going then. When we get to a door you stop and turn on the light."

They crossed the kitchen, Matt glancing at the sink and stove and refrigerator: no dishes in the sink or even the dish rack beside it, no grease splashings on the stove, the refrigerator door clean and white. He did not want to look at any more but he looked quickly at all he could see: in the living room magazines and newspapers in a wicker basket, clean ashtrays, a record player, the records shelved next to it, then down the hall where, near the bedroom door, hung a color photograph of Mary Ann and the two boys sitting on a lawn — there was no house in the picture — Mary Ann smiling at the camera or Strout or whoever held the camera, smiling as she had on Matt's lawn this summer while he waited for the charcoal and they all talked and he looked at her brown legs and at Frank touching her arm, her shoulder, her hair; he moved down the hall with her smile in his mind, wondering: was that when they were both playing around and she was smiling like that at him and they were happy, even sometimes, making it worth it? He recalled her eyes, the pain in them, and he was conscious of the circles of love he was touching with the hand that held the revolver so tightly now as Strout stopped at the door at the end of the hall.

"There's no wall switch."

"Where's the light?"

"By the bed."

"Let's go."

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Matt stayed a pace behind, then Strout leaned over and the room was lighted: the bed, a double one, was neatly made; the ashtray on the bedside table clean, the bureau top dustless, and no photographs; probably so the girl — who was she? — would not have to see Mary Ann in the bedroom she believed was theirs. But because Matt was a father and a husband, though never an ex-husband, he knew (and did not want to know) that this bedroom had never been theirs alone. Strout turned around; Matt looked at his lips, his wide jaw, and thought of Frank's doomed and fearful eyes looking up from the couch.

"Where's Mr. Trotter?"

"Waiting. Pack clothes for warm weather."

"What's going on?"

"You're jumping bail."

"Mr. Fowler —"

He pointed the cocked revolver at Strout's face. The barrel trembled but not much, not as much as he had expected. Strout went to the closet and got the suitcase from the floor and opened it on the bed. As he went to the bureau, he said: "He was making it with my wife. I'd go pick up my kids and he'd be there. Sometimes he spent the night. My boys told me."

He did not look at Matt as he spoke. He opened the top drawer and Matt stepped closer so he could see Strout's hands: underwear and socks, the socks rolled, the underwear folded and stacked. He took them back to the bed, arranged them neatly in the suitcase, then from the closet he was taking shirts and trousers and a jacket; he laid them on the bed and Matt followed him to the bathroom and watched from the door while he packed those things a person accumulated and that became part of him so that at times in the store Matt felt he was selling more than clothes.

"I wanted to try to get together with her again." He was bent over the suitcase. "I couldn't even talk to her. He was always with her. I'm going to jail for it; if I ever get out I'll be an old man. Isn't that enough?"

"You're not going to jail."

Strout closed the suitcase and faced Matt, looking at the gun. Matt went to his rear, so Strout was between him and the lighted hall; then using his handkerchief he turned off the lamp and said: "Let's go."

They went down the hall, Matt looking again at the photograph, and through the living room and kitchen, Matt turning off the lights and talking, frightened that he was talking, that he was telling this lie he had not planned: "It's the trial. We can't go through that, my wife and me. So you're leaving. We've got you a ticket, and a job. A friend of Mr. Trotter's. Out west. My wife keeps seeing you. We can't have that anymore."

Matt turned out the kitchen light and put the handkerchief in his pocket, and they went down the two brick steps and across the lawn. Strout put the suitcase on the floor of the back seat, then got into the front seat and Matt got in the back and put on his glove and shut the door.

"They'll catch me. They'll check passenger lists."

"We didn't use your name."

"They'll figure that out too. You think I wouldn't have done it myself if it was that easy?"

He backed into the street, Matt looking down the gun barrel but not at the profiled face beyond it.

"You were alone," Matt said. "We've got it worked out."

"There's no planes this time of night, Mr. Fowler."

"Go back through town. Then north on 125."

They came to the corner and turned, and now Willis's headlights were in the car with Matt.

"Why north, Mr. Fowler?"

"Somebody's going to keep you for a while. They'll take you to the airport." He uncocked the hammer and lowered the revolver to his lap and said wearily: "No more talking."

As they drove back through town, Matt's body sagged, going limp with his spirit and its new and false bond with Strout, the hope his lie had given Strout.

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He had grown up in this town whose streets had become places of apprehension and pain for Ruth as she drove and walked, doing what she had to do; and for him too, if only in his mind as he worked and chatted six days a week in his store; he wondered now if his lie would have worked, if sending Strout away would have been enough; but then he knew that just thinking of Strout in Montana or whatever place lay at the end of the lie he had told, thinking of him walking the streets there, loving a girl there (who *was* she?) would be enough to slowly rot the rest of his days. And Ruth's. Again he was certain that she knew, that she was waiting for him.

They were in New Hampshire now, on the narrow highway, passing the shopping center at the state line, and then houses and small stores and sandwich shops. There were few cars on the road. After ten minutes he raised his trembling hand, touched Strout's neck with the gun, and said: "Turn in up here. At the dirt road."

Strout flicked on the indicator and slowed.

"Mr. Fowler?"

"They're waiting here."

Strout turned very slowly, easing his neck away from the gun. In the moonlight the road was light brown, lighter and yellowed where the headlights shone; weeds and a few trees grew on either side of it, and ahead of them were the woods.

"There's nothing back here, Mr. Fowler."

"It's for your car. You don't think we'd leave it at the airport, do you?"

He watched Strout's large, big-knuckled hands tighten on the wheel, saw Frank's face that night: not the stitches and bruised eye and swollen lips, but his own hand gently touching Frank's jaw, turning his wounds to the light. They rounded a bend in the road and were out of sight of the highway: tall trees all around them now, hiding the moon. When they reached the abandoned gravel pit on the left, the bare flat earth and steep pale embankment behind it, and the black crowns of trees at its top, Matt said: "Stop here."

Strout stopped but did not turn off the engine. Matt pressed the gun hard against his neck, and he straightened in the seat and looked in the rearview mirror, Matt's eyes meeting his in the glass for an instant before looking at the hair at the end of the gun barrel.

"Turn it off."

Strout did, then held the wheel with two hands, and looked in the mirror.

"I'll do twenty years, Mr. Fowler; at least. I'll be forty-six years old."

"That's nine years younger than I am," Matt said, and got out and took off the glove and kicked the door shut. He aimed at Strout's ear and pulled back the hammer. Willis's headlights were off and Matt heard him walking on the soft thin layer of dust, the hard earth beneath it. Strout opened the door, sat for a moment in the interior light, then stepped out onto the road. Now his face was pleading. Matt did not look at his eyes, but he could see it in the lips.

"Just get the suitcase. They're right up the road."

Willis was beside him now, to his left. Strout looked at both guns. Then he opened the back door, leaned in, and with a jerk brought the suitcase out. He was turning to face them when Matt said: "Just walk up the road. Just ahead."

Strout turned to walk, the suitcase in his right hand, and Matt and Willis followed; as Strout cleared the front of his car he dropped the suitcase and, ducking, took one step that was the beginning of a sprint to his right. The sun

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kicked in Matt's hand, and the explosion of the shot surrounded him, isolated him in a nimbus of sound that cut him off from all his time, all his history, isolated him standing absolutely still on the dirt road with the gun in his hand, looking down at Richard Strout squirming on his belly, kicking one leg behind him, pushing himself forward, toward the woods. Then Matt went to him and shot him once in the back of the head.

Driving south to Boston, wearing both gloves now, staying in the middle lane and looking often in the rearview mirror at Willis's headlights, he relived the suitcase dropping, the quick dip and turn of Strout's back, and the kick of the gun, the sound of the shot. When he walked to Strout, he still existed within the first shot, still trembled and breathed with it. The second shot and the burial seemed to be happening to someone else, someone he was watching. He and Willis each held an arm and pulled Strout face-down off the road and into the woods, his bouncing sliding belt white under the trees where it was so dark that when they stopped at the top of the knoll, panting and sweating, Matt could not see where Strout's blue shirt ended and the earth began. They pulled off the branches then dragged Strout to the edge of the hole and went behind him and lifted his legs and pushed him in. They stood still for a moment. The woods were quiet save for their breathing, and Matt remembered hearing the movements of birds and small animals after the first shot. Or maybe he had not heard them. Willis went down to the road. Matt could see him clearly out on the tan dirt, could see the glint of Strout's car and, beyond the road, the gravel pit. Willis came back up the knoll with the suitcase. He dropped it in the hole and took off his gloves and they went down to his car for the spades. They worked quietly. Sometimes they paused to listen to the woods. When they were finished Willis turned on his flashlight and they covered the earth with leaves and branches and then went down to the spot in front of the car, and while Matt held the light Willis crouched and sprinkled dust on the blood, backing up till he reached the grass and leaves, then he used leaves until they had worked up to the grave again. They did not stop. They walked around the grave and through the woods, using the light on the ground, looking up through the trees to where they ended at the lake. Neither of them spoke above the sounds of their heavy and clumsy strides through low brush and over fallen branches. Then they reached it: wide and dark, lapping softly at the bank, pine needles smooth under Matt's feet, moonlight on the lake, a small island near its middle, with black, tall evergreens. He took out the gun and threw for the island: taking two steps back on the pine needles, striding with the throw and going to one knee as he followed through, looking up to see the dark shapeless object arcing downward, splashing.

They left Strout's car in Boston, in front of an apartment building on Commonwealth Avenue. When they got back to town Willis drove slowly over the bridge and Matt threw the keys into the Merrimack. The sky was turning light. Willis let him out a block from his house, and walking home he listened for sounds from the houses he passed. They were quiet. A light was on in his living room. He turned it off and undressed in there, and went softly toward the bedroom; in the hall he smelled the smoke, and he stood in the bedroom doorway and looked at the orange of her cigarette in the dark. The curtains were closed. He went to the closet and put his shoes on the floor and felt for a hanger.

"Did you do it?" she said.

He went down the hall to the bathroom and in the dark he washed his hands and face. Then he went to her, lay on his back, and pulled the sheet up to his throat.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"I think so."

Now she touched him, lying on her side, her hand on his belly, his thigh.

"Tell me," she said.

He started from the beginning, in the parking lot at the bar; but soon with his eyes closed and Ruth petting him, he spoke of Strout's house: the order, the woman presence, the picture on the wall.

"The way she was smiling," he said.

"What about it?"

"I don't know. Did you ever see Strout's girl? When you saw him in town?"

"No."

"I wonder who she was."

Then he thought: *not was: is. Sleeping now she is his girl.* He opened his eyes, then closed them again. There was more light beyond the curtains. With Ruth now he left Strout's house and told again his lie to Strout, gave him again that hope that Strout must have for a while believed, else he would have to believe only the gun pointed at him for the last two hours of his life. And with Ruth he saw again the dropping suitcase, the darting move to the right: and he told of the first shot, feeling her hand on him but his heart isolated still, beating on the road still in that explosion like thunder. He told her the rest, but the words had no images for him, he did not see himself doing what the words said he had done; he only saw himself on that road.

"We can't tell the other kids," she said. "It'll hurt them, thinking he got away. But we mustn't."

"No."

She was holding him, wanting him, and he wished he could make love with her but he could not. He saw Frank and Mary Ann making love in her bed, their eyes closed, their bodies brown and smelling of the sea; the other girl was faceless, bodiless, but he felt her sleeping now; and he saw Frank and Strout, their faces alive; he saw red and yellow leaves falling on the earth, then snow: falling and freezing and falling; and holding Ruth, his cheek touching her breast, he shuddered with a sob that he kept silent in his heart.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. FIRST RESPONSE. How do you feel about Matt's act of revenge? Trace the emotions his character produces in you as the plot unfolds.
2. Discuss the significance of the title. Why is "Killings" a more appropriate title than "Killers"?
3. What are the effects of Dubus's ordering of events in the story? How would the effects be different if the story were told in a chronological order?
4. Describe the Fowler family before Frank's murder. How does the murder affect Matt?
5. What is learned about Richard from the flashback in paragraphs 32 through 75? How does this information affect your attitude toward him?

6. What is the effect of the description of Richard shooting Frank in paragraph 76?
7. How well planned is Matt's revenge? Why does he lie to Richard about sending him out west?
8. How do the details of the killing and the disposal of Richard's body reveal Matt's emotions? What is he thinking and feeling as he performs these actions? How did you feel reading about them?
9. Describe Matt at the end of the story when he tells his wife about the killing. How do you think this revenge killing will affect the Fowler family?
10. How might "Killings" be considered a love story as well as a murder story?

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Matt's motivation for murder with Emily's in "A Rose for Emily" (p. 72). Which character made you feel more empathy and sympathy for his or her actions? Why?
2. Explore the father-son relationships in "Killings" and William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" (p. 481). Read the section on psychological criticism in Chapter 37, "Critical Strategies for Reading." How do you think a psychological critic would interpret these relationships in each story?
3. In an essay discuss the respective treatments of family life in "Killings" and Gish Jen's "In the American Society" (p. 643). Do these very different stories have anything in common?

PERSPECTIVES

THOMAS E. KENNEDY (b. 1944)

On Morality and Revenge in "Killings"

1988

When Fowler fires at the younger man, "the explosion of the shot surrounded him, isolated him in a nimbus of sound that cut him off from all his time, all his history, isolated him standing absolutely still on the dirt road. . . . The second shot . . . seemed to be happening to someone else, someone he was watching." When Fowler returns home after he and his friend have buried Strout's body, his wife is waiting for him in the dark bedroom. She knows, without having been told, what he has done, and she tries to make love to him while he relates the details, but he cannot make love, for he has isolated himself by his act. The final irony occurs when they realize they will be unable to tell their other children about it, that the children will believe their brother's murderer has escaped trial and punishment and has run off. Thus, we see the first consequence of Fowler's unnatural act, the profound isolation he must suffer for it. Even his sob at the close of the story is one of isolation, "silent in his heart."

The story's point is clear: the blade of murder cuts both ways. Victim and killer are united and isolated, one in death, the other in the ultimate breach of contact for human life. Like Cain, the killer has distinguished himself from hu-

mankind and presumably must suffer that distinction for the rest of his days. An intriguing question that follows from the story is whether the act of murder affects all men equally. Will a person of inferior morality suffer equally with a person of more sensitive humanity like Matt Fowler? Throughout Fowler's abduction of Strout, he must fight to prevent himself from witnessing Strout's humanity, must forbid him from speaking lest he become too close to the sound of his voice, must prevent himself from smelling the man's smells. When, finally, he must lie to Strout to accomplish the abduction, giving the younger man hope that he is not to be killed, Fowler suffers for his cruelty. Thus, there is not even a moment's satisfaction of vengeance for Fowler; his is a rational act, an extermination to eliminate Strout from their world and end Ruth's pain. Strout, presumably, killed Fowler's son in passion. It is interesting to compare the two acts and to compare the fate of suffering attached to each.

A profound lifelong isolation awaits Fowler as a result of his act of premeditated murder. It is intriguing to consider what Strout's fate might have been had he stood trial and gone to prison for his act. The suggestion is that Strout was a man of inferior morality, the son of an affluent family who pampered him, a violent husband. Might the culmination of his weakness in murder and the suffering imposed on him for it, the experience of finally having to account for his actions, have resulted in his moral development and growth?

What then, finally, is the meaning for human society of Fowler's homicidal revenge? We understand Fowler. We follow him through his deed not without the desire for him to complete it, to succeed, to rid the world of this killer. We note his reluctance, his moral hesitation, the morality he must overcome, and we urge him, on some level, to overcome it. Once he has begun the action, abducted Strout, we know he *must* complete it, even if we share his mixed feelings about the choice he has made. Yet what is the final result for the world? Strout is eliminated, but Fowler is left morally wounded to walk the earth, and his suffering will spread, has already begun to spread to his children.

From *Andre Dubus: A Study of the Short Fiction*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. Explain how you would answer the following question raised by Kennedy: "Will a person of inferior morality suffer equally with a person of more sensitive humanity like Matt Fowler?"
2. Discuss why and how profound isolation affects nearly all the characters in this story.

A. L. BADER (b. 1902)

Nothing Happens in Modern Short Stories

1945

Any teacher who has ever confronted a class with representative modern short stories will remember the disappointment, the puzzled "so-what" attitude, of certain members of the group. "Nothing happens in some of these stories," "They just end," or "They're not real stories" are frequent criticisms. . . . Sometimes the phrase "Nothing happens" comes to mean that nothing is happening.

another thing, Hulga," he said, using the name as if he didn't think much of it, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" and then the toast-colored hat disappeared down the hole and the girl was left, sitting on the straw in the dusty sunlight. When she turned her churning face toward the opening, she saw his blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake.

Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who were in the back pasture, digging up onions, saw him emerge a little later from the woods and head across the meadow toward the highway. "Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday," Mrs. H

must have been selling them to the Negroes back she said, "but I guess the world would be better if Mrs. Freeman's gaze drove forward and just appeared under the hill. Then she returned her a onion shoot she was lifting from the ground. "So said. "I know I never could."

Source: Introduction to Literature
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Date: 1990

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. FIRST RESPONSE. What do you think of Hulga's conviction that intelligence and education are incompatible with religious faith?
2. Why is it significant that Mrs. Hopewell's daughter has two names? How do the other characters' names serve to characterize them?
3. Why do you think Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell are introduced before Hulga? What do they contribute to Hulga's story?
4. Identify the conflict in this story. How is it resolved?
5. Hulga and the Bible salesman play a series of jokes on each other. How are these deceptions related to the theme?
6. What is the effect of O'Connor's use of the phrase "good country people" throughout the story? Why is it an appropriate title?
7. The Bible salesman's final words to Hulga are "You ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" What religious values are expressed in the story?
8. After the Bible salesman leaves Hulga at the end of the story, O'Connor adds two more paragraphs concerning Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman. What is the purpose of these final paragraphs?
9. Hulga's perspective on life is ironic, but she is also the subject of O'Connor's irony. Explain how O'Connor uses irony to reveal Hulga's character.
10. This story would be different if told from Hulga's point of view. Describe how the use of a limited omniscient narrator contributes to the story's effects.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. How do Mrs. Hopewell's assumptions about life compare with those of Krebs's mother in Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" (p. 145)? Explain how the conflict in each story is related to what the mothers come to represent in the eyes of the central characters.
2. How are country people portrayed in this story and in "The Turkey" (p. 373)? In general, does O'Connor treat them positively or negatively?

Revelation

1964

The doctor's waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins entered and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her presence. She stood looming at the head of the magazine table set in the center of it, a living demonstration that the room was inadequate and ridiculous. Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation. There was one vacant chair and a place on the sofa occupied by a blond child in a dirty blue romper who should have been told to move over and make room for the lady. He was five or six, but Mrs. Turpin saw at once that no one was going to tell him to move over. He was slumped down in the seat, his arms idle at his sides and his eyes idle in his head; his nose ran unchecked.

Mrs. Turpin put a firm hand on Claud's shoulder and said in a voice that included anyone who wanted to listen, "Claud, you sit in that chair there," and gave him a push down into the vacant one. Claud was florid and bald and sturdy, somewhat shorter than Mrs. Turpin, but he sat down as if he were accustomed to doing what she told him to.

Mrs. Turpin remained standing. The only man in the room besides Claud was a lean stringy old fellow with a rusty hand spread out on each knee, whose eyes were closed as if he were asleep or dead or pretending to be so as not to get up and offer her his seat. Her gaze settled agreeably on a well-dressed gray-haired lady whose eyes met hers and whose expression said: if that child belonged to me, he would have some manners and move over — there's plenty of room there for you and him too.

Claud looked up with a sigh and made as if to rise.

"Sit down," Mrs. Turpin said. "You know you're not supposed to stand on that leg. He has an ulcer on his leg," she explained.

Claud lifted his foot onto the magazine table and rolled his trouser leg up to reveal a purple swelling on a plump marble-white calf.

"My!" the pleasant lady said. "How did you do that?"

"A cow kicked him," Mrs. Turpin said.

"Goodness!" said the lady.

Claud rolled his trouser leg down.

"Maybe the little boy would move over," the lady suggested, but the child did not stir.

"Somebody will be leaving in a minute," Mrs. Turpin said. She could not understand why a doctor — with as much money as they made charging five dollars a day to just stick their head in the hospital door and look at you — couldn't afford a decent-sized waiting room. This one was hardly bigger than a garage. The table was cluttered with limp-looking magazines and at one end of it there was a big green glass ash tray full of cigarette butts and cotton wads with little blood spots on them. If she had had anything to do with the running of the place, that would have been emptied every so often. There were no chairs against the wall at the head of the room. It had a rectangular-shaped panel in it that permitted a view of the office where the nurse came and went and the secretary listened to the radio. A plastic fern in a gold pot sat in the opening and trailed its fronds down almost to the floor. The radio was softly playing gospel music.

When the inner door opened and a nurse with the highest stack of yellow hair Mrs. Turpin had ever seen put her face in the crack and called for the next patient. The woman sitting beside Claud grasped the two arms of her chair and hoisted herself up; she pulled her dress free from her legs and lumbered through the door where the nurse had disappeared.

Mrs. Turpin eased into the vacant chair, which held her tight as a corset. "I wish I could reduce," she said, and rolled her eyes and gave a comic sigh.

"Oh, you aren't fat," the stylish lady said.

"Ooooo I am too," Mrs. Turpin said. "Claud he eats all he wants to and never weighs over one hundred and seventy-five pounds, but me I just look at something good to eat and I gain some weight," and her stomach and shoulders shook with laughter. "You can eat all you want to, can't you, Claud?" she asked, turning to him.

Claud only grinned.

"Well, as long as you have such a good disposition," the stylish lady said, "I don't think it makes a bit of difference what size you are. You just can't beat a good disposition."

Next to her was a fat girl of eighteen or nineteen, scowling into a thick blue book which Mrs. Turpin saw was entitled *Human Development*. The girl raised her head and directed her scowl at Mrs. Turpin as if she did not like her looks. She appeared annoyed that anyone should speak while she tried to read. The poor girl's face was blue with acne and Mrs. Turpin thought how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age. She gave the girl a friendly smile but the girl only scowled the harder. Mrs. Turpin herself was fat but she had always had good skin, and though she was forty-seven years old, there was not a wrinkle in her face except around her eyes from laughing too much.

Next to the ugly girl was the child, still in exactly the same position, and next to him was a thin leathery old woman in a cotton print dress. She and Claud had three sacks of chicken feed in their pump house that was in the same print. She had seen from the first that the child belonged with the old woman. She could tell by the way they sat — kind of vacant and white-trashy, as if they would sit there until Doomsday if nobody called and told them to get up. And at right angles but next to the well-dressed pleasant lady was a lank-faced woman who was certainly the child's mother. She had on a yellow sweat shirt and wine-colored slacks, both gritty-looking, and the rims of her lips were stained with snuff. Her dirty yellow hair was tied behind with a little piece of red paper ribbon. Worse than niggers any day, Mrs. Turpin thought.

The gospel hymn playing was, "When I looked up and He looked down," and Mrs. Turpin, who knew it, supplied the last line mentally, "And wona these days I know I'll we-ear a crown."

Without appearing to, Mrs. Turpin always noticed people's feet. The well-dressed lady had on red and gray suede shoes to match her dress. Mrs. Turpin had on her good black patent leather pumps. The ugly girl had on Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks. The old woman had on tennis shoes and the white-trashy mother had on what appeared to be bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them — exactly what you would have expected her to have on.

Sometimes at night when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself. If Jesus had said to her before he made her, "There's

only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash," what would she have said? "Please, Jesus, please," she would have said, "just let me wait until there's another place available," and he would have said, "No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places so make up your mind." She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, "All right, make me a nigger then — but that don't mean a trashy one." And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black.

Next to the child's mother was a red-headed youngish woman, reading one of the magazines and working a piece of chewing gum, hell for leather, as Claud would say. Mrs. Turpin could not see the woman's feet. She was not white-trash, just common. Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them — not above, just away from — were the white-trash; then above them were the homeowners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven.

"That's a beautiful clock," she said and nodded to her right. It was a big wall clock, the face encased in a brass sunburst.

"Yes, it's very pretty," the stylish lady said agreeably. "And right on the dot too," she added, glancing at her watch.

The ugly girl beside her cast an eye upward at the clock, smirked, then looked directly at Mrs. Turpin and smirked again. Then she returned her eyes to her book. She was obviously the lady's daughter because, although they didn't look anything alike as to disposition, they both had the same shape of face and the same blue eyes. On the lady they sparkled pleasantly but in the girl's seared face they appeared alternately to smolder and to blaze.

What if Jesus had said, "All right, you can be white-trash or a nigger or ugly!"

Mrs. Turpin felt an awful pity for the girl, though she thought it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly.

The woman with the snuff-stained lips turned around in her chair and looked up at the clock. Then she turned back and appeared to look a little to the side of Mrs. Turpin. There was a cast in one of her eyes. "You want to know wher you can get you one of themther clocks?" she asked in a loud voice.

"No, I already have a nice clock," Mrs. Turpin said. Once somebody like her got a leg in the conversation, she would be all over it.

"You can get you one with green stamps," the woman said. "That's most likely wher he got hisn. Save you up enough, you can get you most anythang. I got me some joo'ry."

Ought to have got you a wash rag and some soap, Mrs. Turpin thought.

"I get contour sheets with mine," the pleasant lady said.

The daughter slammed her book shut. She looked straight in front of her, directly through Mrs. Turpin and on through the yellow curtain and the plate glass window which made the wall behind her. The girl's eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give. Mrs. Turpin turned her head to see if there was anything going on outside that she should see, but she could not see anything. Figures passing cast only a pale shadow through the curtain. There was no reason the girl should single her out for her ugly looks.

"Miss Finley," the nurse said, cracking the door. The gum-chewing woman got up and passed in front of her and Claud and went into the office. She had on red high-heeled shoes.

Directly across the table, the ugly girl's eyes were fixed on Mrs. Turpin as if she had some very special reason for disliking her.

"This is wonderful weather, isn't it?" the girl's mother said.

"It's good weather for cotton if you can get the niggers to pick it," Mrs. Turpin said, "but niggers don't want to pick cotton any more. You can't get the white folks to pick it and now you can't get the niggers — because they got to be right up there with the white folks."

"They gonna try anyways," the white-trash woman said, leaning forward.

"Do you have one of the cotton-picking machines?" the pleasant lady asked.

"No," Mrs. Turpin said, "they leave half the cotton in the field. We don't have much cotton anyway. If you want to make it farming now, you have to have a little of everything. We got a couple of acres of cotton and a few hogs and chickens and just enough white-face that Claud can look after them himself."

"One thang I don't want," the white-trash woman said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Hogs. Nasty stinking things, a-gruntin and a-rootin all over the place."

Mrs. Turpin gave her the merest edge of her attention. "Our hogs are not dirty and they don't stink," she said. "They're cleaner than some children I've seen. Their feet never touch the ground. We have a pig parlor — that's where you raise them on concrete," she explained to the pleasant lady, "and Claud scoots them down with the hose every afternoon and washes off the floor." Cleaner by far than that child right there, she thought. Poor nasty little thing. He had not moved except to put the thumb of his dirty hand into his mouth.

The woman turned her face away from Mrs. Turpin. "I know I wouldn't scoot down no hog with no hose," she said to the wall.

You wouldn't have no hog to scoot down, Mrs. Turpin said to herself.

"A-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin," the woman muttered.

"We got a little of everything," Mrs. Turpin said to the pleasant lady. "It's no use in having more than you can handle yourself with help like it is. We found enough niggers to pick our cotton this year but Claud he has to go after them and take them home again in the evening. They can't walk that half a mile. No they can't. I tell you," she said and laughed merrily, "I sure am tired of buttering up niggers, but you got to love em if you want em to work for you. When they come in the morning, I run out and I say, 'Hi yawl this morning?'"

and when Claud drives them off to the field I just wave to beat the band and they just wave back." And she waved her hand rapidly to illustrate.

"Like you read out of the same book," the lady said, showing she understood perfectly.

"Child, yes," Mrs. Turpin said. "And when they come in from the field, I run out with a bucket of icewater. That's the way it's going to be from now on," she said. "You may as well face it."

"One thang I know," the white-trash woman said. "Two thangs I ain't going to do: love no niggers or scoot down no hog with no hose." And she let out a bark of contempt.

The look that Mrs. Turpin and the pleasant lady exchanged indicated they both understood that you had to have certain things before you could know certain things. But every time Mrs. Turpin exchanged a look with the lady, she was aware that the ugly girl's peculiar eyes were still on her, and she had trouble bringing her attention back to the conversation.

"When you got something," she said, "you got to look after it." And when you ain't got a thing but breath and britches, she added to herself, you can afford to come to town every morning and just sit on the Court House coping and spit.

A grotesque revolving shadow passed across the curtain behind her and was thrown palely on the opposite wall. Then a bicycle clattered down against the outside of the building. The door opened and a colored boy glided in with a tray from the drugstore. It had two large red and white paper cups on it with tops on them. He was a tall, very black boy in discolored white pants and a green nylon shirt. He was chewing gum slowly, as if to music. He set the tray down in the office opening next to the fern and stuck his head through to look for the secretary. She was not in there. He rested his arms on the ledge and waited, his narrow bottom stuck out, swaying to the left and right. He raised a hand over his head and scratched the base of his skull.

"You see that button there, boy?" Mrs. Turpin said. "You can punch that and she'll come. She's probably in the back somewhere."

"Is that right?" the boy said agreeably, as if he had never seen the button before. He leaned to the right and put his finger on it. "She sometime out," he said and twisted around to face his audience, his elbows behind him on the counter. The nurse appeared and he twisted back again. She handed him a dollar and he rooted in his pocket and made the change and counted it out to her. She gave him fifteen cents for a tip and he went out with the empty tray. The heavy door swung to slowly and closed at length with the sound of suction. For a moment no one spoke.

"They ought to send all them niggers back to Africa," the white-trash woman said. "That's wher they come from in the first place."

"Oh, I couldn't do without my good colored friends," the pleasant lady said.

"There's a heap of things worse than a nigger," Mrs. Turpin agreed. "It's all kinds of them just like it's all kinds of us."

"Yes, and it takes all kinds to make the world go round," the lady said in her musical voice.

As she said it, the raw-complexioned girl snapped her teeth together. Her lower lip turned downwards and inside out, revealing the pale pink inside of

he youth. After a second it rolled back up. It was the ugliest face Mrs. Turpin had ever seen anyone make and for a moment she was certain that the girl had made it at her. She was looking at her as if she had known and disliked her all her life—all of Mrs. Turpin's life, it seemed too, not just all the girl's life. Why, girl, I don't even know you, Mrs. Turpin said silently.

She forced her attention back to the discussion. "It wouldn't be practical to send them back to Africa," she said. "They wouldn't want to go. They got it too good here."

"Wouldn't be what they wanted—if I had anythang to do with it," the woman said.

"It wouldn't be a way in the world you could get all the niggers back over there," Mrs. Turpin said. "They'd be hiding out and lying down and turning sick on you and wailing and hollering and raring and pitching. It wouldn't be a way in the world to get them over there."

"They got over here," the trashy woman said. "Get back like they got over." 65

"It wasn't so many of them then," Mrs. Turpin explained.

The woman looked at Mrs. Turpin as if here was an idiot indeed but Mrs. Turpin was not bothered by the look, considering where it came from.

"Nooo," she said, "they're going to stay here where they can go to New York and marry white folks and improve their color. That's what they all want to do, every one of them, improve their color."

"You know what comes of that, don't you?" Claud asked.

"No, Claud, what?" Mrs. Turpin said. 70

Claud's eyes twinkled. "White-faced niggers," he said with never a smile.

Everybody in the office laughed except the white-trash and the ugly girl. The girl gripped the book in her lap with white fingers. The trashy woman looked around her from face to face as if she thought they were all idiots. The old woman in the feed sack dress continued to gaze expressionless across the floor at the high-top shoes of the man opposite her, the one who had been pretending to be asleep when the Turpins came in. He was laughing heartily, his hands still spread out on his knees. The child had fallen to the side and was lying now almost face down in the old woman's lap.

While they recovered from their laughter, the nasal chorus on the radio kept the room from silence.

"You go to blank blank
And I'll go to mine
But we'll all blank along
To-gether,
And all along the blank
We'll hep each other out
Smile-ling in any kind of
Weath-ther!"

Mrs. Turpin didn't catch every word but she caught enough to agree with the spirit of the song and it turned her thoughts sober. To help anybody out that needed it was her philosophy of life. She never spared herself when she found somebody in need, whether they were white or black, trash or decent. And of all she had to be thankful for, she was most thankful that this was so. If Jesus had said, "You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can't be a good woman with it," she would have

had to say, "Well don't make me that then. Make me a good nigger man and it don't matter what else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!" Her heart rose. He had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus, thank you! she said. Thank you thank you thank you! Whenever she counted her blessings she felt as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty-five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty.

"What's wrong with your little boy?" the pleasant lady asked the white-trashy woman. 75

"He has a ulcer," the woman said proudly. "He ain't give me a minute's peace since he was born. Him and her are just alike," she said, nodding at the old woman, who was running her leathery fingers through the child's pale hair. "Look like I can't get nothing down them two but Co' Cola and candy."

That's all you try to get down em, Mrs. Turpin said to herself. Too lazy to light the fire. There was nothing you could tell her about people like them that she didn't know already. And it was not just that they didn't have anything. Because if you gave them everything, in two weeks it would all be broken or filthy or they would have chopped it up for lightwood. She knew all this from her own experience. Help them you must, but help them you couldn't.

All at once the ugly girl turned her lips inside out again. Her eyes fixed like two drills on Mrs. Turpin. This time there was no mistaking that there was something urgent behind them.

Girl, Mrs. Turpin exclaimed silently, I haven't done a thing to you! The girl might be confusing her with somebody else. There was no need to sit by and let herself be intimidated. "You must be in college," she said boldly, looking directly at the girl. "I see you reading a book there."

The girl continued to stare and pointedly did not answer. 80

Her mother blushed at this rudeness. "The lady asked you a question, Mary Grace," she said under her breath.

"I have ears," Mary Grace said.

The poor mother blushed again. "Mary Grace goes to Wellesley College," she explained. She twisted one of the buttons on her dress. "In Massachusetts," she added with a grimace. "And in the summer she just keeps right on studying. Just reads all the time, a real book worm. She's done real well at Wellesley; she's taking English and Math and History and Psychology and Social Studies," she rattled on, "and I think it's too much. I think she ought to get out and have fun."

The girl looked as if she would like to hurl them all through the plate glass window.

"Way up north," Mrs. Turpin murmured and thought, well, it hasn't done 85 much for her manners.

"I'd almost rather to have him sick," the white-trash woman said, wrenching the attention back to herself. "He's so mean when he ain't. Look like some children just take natural to meanness. It's some gets bad when they get sick but he was the opposite. Took sick and turned good. He don't give me no trouble now. It's me waitin to see the doctor," she said.

If I was going to send anybody back to Africa, Mrs. Turpin thought, it would be your kind, woman. "Yes, indeed," she said aloud, but looking up at the ceiling, "it's a heap of things worse than a nigger." And dirtier than a hog, she added to herself.

"I think people with bad dispositions are more to be pitied than anyone on earth," the pleasant lady said in a voice that was decidedly thin.

"I thank the Lord he has blessed me with a good one," Mrs. Turpin said. "The day has never dawned that I couldn't find something to laugh at."

"Not since she married me anyways," Claud said with a comical straight face.

Everybody laughed except the girl and the white-trash.

Mrs. Turpin's stomach shook. "He's such a caution," she said, "that I can't help but laugh at him."

The girl made a loud ugly noise through her teeth.

Her mother's mouth grew thin and tight. "I think the worst thing in the world," she said, "is an ungrateful person. To have everything and not appreciate it. I know a girl," she said, "who has parents who would give her anything, a little brother who loves her dearly, who is getting a good education, who wears the best clothes, but who can never say a kind word to anyone, who never smiles, who just criticizes and complains all day long."

"Is she too old to paddle?" Claud asked.

The girl's face was almost purple.

"Yes," the lady said, "I'm afraid there's nothing to do but leave her to her folly. Some day she'll wake up and it'll be too late."

"It never hurt anyone to smile," Mrs. Turpin said. "It just makes you feel better all over."

"Of course," the lady said sadly, "but there are just some people you can't tell anything to. They can't take criticism."

"If it's one thing I am," Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, "it's grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, 'Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!' It could have been different!" For one thing, somebody else could have got Claud. At the thought of this, she was flooded with gratitude and a terrible pang of joy ran through her. "Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!" she cried aloud.

The book struck her directly over her left eye. It struck almost at the same instant that she realized the girl was about to hurl it. Before she could utter a sound, the raw face came crashing across the table toward her, howling. The girl's fingers sank like clamps into the soft flesh of her neck. She heard the mother cry out and Claud shout, "Whoa!" There was an instant when she was certain that she was about to be in an earthquake.

All at once her vision narrowed and she saw everything as if it were happening in a small room far away, or as if she were looking at it through the wrong end of a telescope. Claud's face crumpled and fell out of sight. The nurse ran in, then out, then in again. Then the gangling figure of the doctor rushed out of the inner door. Magazines flew this way and that as the table turned over. The girl fell with a thud and Mrs. Turpin's vision suddenly reversed itself and she saw everything large instead of small. The eyes of the white-trashy woman were staring hugely at the floor. There the girl, held down on one side by the nurse and on the other by her mother, was wrenching and turning in their grasp. The doctor was kneeling astride her, trying to hold her arm down. He managed after a second to sink a long needle into it.

Mrs. Turpin felt entirely hollow except for her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh.

"Somebody that's not busy call for the ambulance," the doctor said in the off-hand voice young doctors adopt for terrible occasions.

Mrs. Turpin could not have moved a finger. The old man who had been sitting next to her skipped nimbly into the office and made the call, for the secretary still seemed to be gone.

"Claud!" Mrs. Turpin called.

He was not in his chair. She knew she must jump up and find him but she felt like some one trying to catch a train in a dream, when everything moves in slow motion and the faster you try to run the slower you go.

"Here I am," a suffocated voice, very unlike Claud's, said.

He was doubled up in the corner on the floor, pale as paper, holding his leg. She wanted to get up and go to him but she could not move. Instead, her gaze was drawn slowly downward to the churning face on the floor, which she could see over the doctor's shoulder.

The girl's eyes stopped rolling and focused on her. They seemed a much lighter blue than before, as if a door that had been tightly closed behind them was now open to admit light and air.

Mrs. Turpin's head cleared and her power of motion returned. She leaned forward until she was looking directly into the fierce brilliant eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition. "What you got to say to me?" she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation.

The girl raised her head. Her gaze locked with Mrs. Turpin's. "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog," she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target.

Mrs. Turpin sank back in her chair.

After a moment the girl's eyes closed and she turned her head wearily to the side.

The doctor rose and handed the nurse the empty syringe. He leaned over and put both hands for a moment on the mother's shoulders, which were shaking. She was sitting on the floor, her lips pressed together, holding Mary Grace's hand in her lap. The girl's fingers were gripped like a baby's around her thumb. "Go on to the hospital," he said. "I'll call and make the arrangements." "Now let's see that neck," he said in a jovial voice to Mrs. Turpin. He began to inspect her neck with his first two fingers. Two little moon-shaped lines like pink fish bones were indented over her windpipe. There was the beginning of an angry red swelling above her eye. His fingers passed over this also.

"Lea' me be," she said thickly and shook him off. "See about Claud. She kicked him."

"I'll see about him in a minute," he said and felt her pulse. He was a thin gray-haired man, given to pleasantries. "Go home and have yourself a vacation the rest of the day," he said and patted her on the shoulder.

Quit your pattin me, Mrs. Turpin growled to herself.

"And put an ice pack over that eye," he said. Then he went and squatted down beside Claud and looked at his leg. After a moment he pulled him up and Claud limped after him into the office.

Until the ambulance came, the only sounds in the room were the tremulous moans of the girl's mother, who continued to sit on the floor. The white-trash woman did not take her eyes off the girl. Mrs. Turpin looked straight

ah at nothing. Presently the ambulance drew up, a long dark shadow, behind the curtain. The attendants came in and set the stretcher down beside the girl and lifted her expertly onto it and carried her out. The nurse helped the mother gather up her things. The shadow of the ambulance moved silently away and the nurse came back in the office.

"That ther girl is going to be a lunatic, ain't she?" the white-trash woman asked the nurse, but the nurse kept on to the back and never answered her.

"Yes, she's going to be a lunatic," the white-trash woman said to the rest of them.

"Po' critter," the old woman murmured. The child's face was still in her lap. His eyes looked idly out over her knees. He had not moved during the disturbance except to draw one leg up under him.

"I thank Gawd," the white-trash woman said fervently, "I ain't a lunatic." 125

Claud came limping out and the Turpins went home.

As their pick-up truck turned into their own dirt road and made the crest of the hill, Mrs. Turpin gripped the window ledge and looked out suspiciously. The land sloped gracefully down through a field dotted with lavender weeds and at the start of the rise their small yellow frame house, with its little flower beds spread out around it like a fancy apron, sat primly in its accustomed place between two giant hickory trees. She would not have been startled to see a burnt wound between two blackened chimneys.

Neither of them felt like eating so they put on their house clothes and lowered the shade in the bedroom and lay down, Claud with his leg on a pillow and herself with a damp washcloth over her eye. The instant she was flat on her back, the image of a razor-backed hog with warts on its face and horns coming out behind its ears snorted into her head. She moaned, a low quiet moan.

"I am not," she said tearfully, "a wart hog. From hell." But the denial had no force. The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck her only now. There was a woman there who was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath.

She rose on her elbow and the washcloth fell into her hand. Claud was lying on his back, snoring. She wanted to tell him what the girl had said. At the same time, she did not wish to put the image of herself as a wart hog from hell into his mind. 130

"Hey, Claud," she muttered and pushed his shoulder.

Claud opened one pale baby blue eye.

She looked into it warily. He did not think about anything. He just went his way.

"Wha, whasit?" he said and closed the eye again.

"Nothing," she said. "Does your leg pain you?"

"Hurts like hell," Claud said. 135

"It'll quit terreckly," she said and lay back down. In a moment Claud was snoring again. For the rest of the afternoon they lay there. Claud slept. She scowled at the ceiling. Occasionally she raised her fist and made a small stabbing motion over her chest as if she was defending her innocence to invisible guests who were like the comforters of Job, reasonable-seeming but wrong.

About five-thirty Claud stirred. "Got to go after those ni . . .," he sighed, not moving.

She was looking straight up as if there were unintelligible handwriting on the ceiling. The protuberance over her eye had turned a greenish-blue. "Listen here," she said.

"What?" 140

"Kiss me."

Claud leaned over and kissed her loudly on the mouth. He pinched her side and their hands interlocked. Her expression of ferocious concentration did not change. Claud got up, groaning and growling, and limped off. She continued to study the ceiling.

She did not get up until she heard the pick-up truck coming back with the Negroes. Then she rose and thrust her feet in her brown oxfords, which she did not bother to lace, and stumped out onto the back porch and got her red plastic bucket. She emptied a tray of ice cubes into it and filled it half full of water and went out into the back yard. Every afternoon after Claud brought the hands in, one of the boys helped him put out hay and the rest waited in the back of the truck until he was ready to take them home. The truck was parked in the shade under one of the hickory trees.

"Hi yawl this morning?" Mrs. Turpin asked grimly, appearing with the bucket and the dipper. There were three women and a boy in the truck.

"Us doin nicely," the oldest woman said. "Hi you doin?" and her gaze struck immediately on the dark lump on Mrs. Turpin's forehead. "You done fell down, ain't you?" she asked in a solicitous voice. The old woman was dark and almost toothless. She had on an old felt hat of Claud's set back on her head. The other two women were younger and lighter and they both had new bright green sunhats. One of them had hers on her head; the other had taken hers off and the boy was grinning beneath it. 145

Mrs. Turpin set the bucket down on the floor of the truck. "Yawl hep yourselves," she said. She looked around to make sure Claud had gone. "No, I didn't fall down," she said, folding her arms. "It was something worse than that."

"Ain't nothing bad happen to you!" the old woman said. She said it as if they all knew that Mrs. Turpin was protected in some special way by Divine Providence. "You just had you a little fall."

"We were in town at the doctor's office for where the cow kicked Mr. Turpin," Mrs. Turpin said in a flat tone that indicated they could leave off their foolishness. "And there was this girl there. A big fat girl with her face all broke out. I could look at that girl and tell she was peculiar but I couldn't tell how. And me and her mama was just talking and going along and all of a sudden WHAM! She throws this big book she was reading at me and . . ."

"Naw!" the old woman cried out.

"And then she jumps over the table and commences to choke me." 150

"Naw!" they all exclaimed, "naw!"

"Hi come she do that?" the old woman asked. "What ail her?"

Mrs. Turpin only glared in front of her.

"Somethin ail her," the old woman said.

"They carried her off in an ambulance," Mrs. Turpin continued, "but before she went she was rolling on the floor and they were trying to hold her down to give her a shot and she said something to me." She paused. "You know what she said to me?" 155

"What she say?" they asked.

"She said," Mrs. Turpin began, and stopped, her face very dark and heavy. The sun was getting whiter and whiter, blanching the sky overhead so that the leaves of the hickory tree were black in the face of it. She could not bring forth the words. "Something real ugly," she muttered.

"She sho shouldn't said nothin ugly to you," the old woman said. "You so sweet. You the sweetest lady I know."

"She pretty too," the one with the hat on said.

"And stout," the other one said. "I never knowed no sweeter white lady."

"That's the truth befo' Jesus," the old woman said. "Amen! You des as sweet and pretty as you can be."

Mrs. Turpin knew exactly how much Negro flattery was worth and it added to her rage. "She said," she began again and finished this time with a fierce rush of breath, "that I was an old wart hog from hell."

There was an astounded silence.

"Where she at?" the youngest woman cried in a piercing voice.

"Lemme see her. I'll kill her!"

"I'll kill her with you!" the other one cried.

"She b'long in the sylum," the old woman said emphatically. "You the sweetest white lady I know."

"She pretty too," the other two said. "Stout as she can be and sweet. Jesus satisfied with her!"

"Deed he is," the woman declared.

Idiot! Mrs. Turpin growled to herself. You could never say anything intelligent to a nigger. You could talk at them but not with them. "Yawl ain't drunk your water," she said shortly. "Leave the bucket in the truck when you're finished with it. I got more to do than just stand around and pass the time of day," and she moved off and into the house.

She stood for a moment in the middle of the kitchen. The dark protuberance over her eye looked like a miniature tornado cloud which might any moment sweep across the horizon of her brow. Her lower lip protruded dangerously. She squared her massive shoulders. Then she marched into the front of the house and out the side door and started down the road to the pig parlor. She had the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle.

The sun was deep yellow now like a harvest moon and was riding westward very fast over the far tree line as if it meant to reach the hogs before she did. The road was rutted and she kicked several good-sized stones out of her path as she strode along. The pig parlor was on a little knoll at the end of a lane that ran off from the side of the barn. It was a square of concrete as large as a small room, with a board fence about four feet high around it. The concrete floor sloped slightly so that the hog wash could drain off into a trench where it was carried to the field for fertilizer. Claud was standing on the outside, on the edge of the concrete, hanging onto the top board, hosing down the floor inside. The hose was connected to the faucet of a water trough nearby.

Mrs. Turpin climbed up beside him and glowered down at the hogs inside. There were seven long-snouted bristly shoats in it—tan with liver-colored spots—and an old sow a few weeks off from farrowing. She was lying on her side grunting. The shoats were running about shaking themselves like idiot children, their little slit pig eyes searching the floor for anything left. She had read that pigs were the most intelligent animal. She doubted it. They were

supposed to be smarter than dogs. There had even been a pig astronaut. He had performed his assignment perfectly but died of a heart attack afterwards because they left him in his electric suit, sitting upright throughout his examination when naturally a hog should be on all fours.

A-gruntin and a-rootin and a-groanin.

"Gimme that hose," she said, yanking it away from Claud. "Go on and carry them niggers home and then get off that leg."

"You look like you might have swallowed a mad dog," Claud observed, but he got down and limped off. He paid no attention to her humors.

Until he was out of earshot, Mrs. Turpin stood on the side of the pen, holding the hose and pointing the stream of water at the hind quarters of any shoat that looked as if it might try to lie down. When he had had time to get over the hill, she turned her head slightly and her wrathful eyes scanned the path. He was nowhere in sight. She turned back again and seemed to gather herself up. Her shoulders rose and she drew in her breath.

"What do you send me a message like that for?" she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury. "How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?" Her free fist was knotted and with the other she gripped the hose, blindly pointing the stream of water in and out of the eye of the old sow whose outraged squeal she did not hear.

The pig parlor commanded a view of the back pasture where their twenty beef cows were gathered around the hay-bales Claud and the boy had put out. The freshly cut pasture sloped down to the highway. Across it was their cotton field and beyond that a dark green dusty wood which they owned as well. The sun was behind the wood, very red, looking over the paling of the trees like a farmer inspecting his own hogs.

"Why me?" she rumbled. "It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church."

She appeared to be the right size woman to command the arena before her. "How am I a hog?" she demanded. "Exactly how am I like them?" and she jabbed the stream of water at the shoats. "There was plenty of trash there. It didn't have to be me.

"If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then," she railed. "You could have made me trash. Or a nigger. If trash is what you wanted why didn't you make me trash?" She shook her fist with the hose in it and a watery snake appeared momentarily in the air. "I could quit working and take it easy and be filthy," she growled. "Lounge about the sidewalks all day drinking root beer. Dip snuff and spit in every puddle and have it all over my face. I could be nasty.

"Or you could have made me a nigger. It's too late for me to be a nigger," she said with deep sarcasm, "but I could act like one. Lay down in the middle of the road and stop traffic. Roll on the ground."

In the deepening light everything was taking on a mysterious hue. The pasture was growing a peculiar glassy green and the streak of highway had turned lavender. She braced herself for a final assault and this time her voice rolled out over the pasture. "Go on," she yelled, "call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on top. There'll still be a top and bottom!"

A garbled echo returned to her.

nal surge of fury shook her and she roared, "Who do you think you are."

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood.

She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it.

A tiny truck, Claud's, appeared on the highway, heading rapidly out of sight. Its gears scraped thinly. It looked like a child's toy. At any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the niggers' brains all over the road.

Mrs. Turpin stood there, her gaze fixed on the highway, all her muscles rigid, until in five or six minutes the truck reappeared, returning. She waited until it had had time to turn into their own road. Then like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the hogs. They had settled all in one corner around the old sow who was grunting softly. A red glow suffused them. They appeared to pant with a secret life.

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. FIRST RESPONSE. Does your attitude toward Mrs. Turpin change or remain the same during the story? Do you like her more at some points than at others? Explain why.
2. Why is it appropriate that the two major settings for the action in this story are a doctor's waiting room and a "pig parlor"?

3. How does Mrs. Turpin's treatment of her husband help to characterize her?
4. Mrs. Turpin notices people's shoes. What does this and her thoughts about "classes of people" (para. 24) reveal about her? How does she see herself in relation to other people?
5. Why does Mary Grace attack Mrs. Turpin?
6. Why is it significant that the book Mary Grace reads is *Human Development*? What is the significance of her name?
7. What does the background music played on the radio contribute to the story?
8. To whom does Mrs. Turpin address this anguished question: "What do you send me a message [Mary Grace's whispered words telling her "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog"] like that for?" (para. 178). Why is Mrs. Turpin so angry and bewildered?
9. What is the "abysmal life-giving knowledge" that Mrs. Turpin discovers in the next to the last paragraph? Why is it "abysmal"? How is it "life-giving"?
10. Given the serious theme, consider whether the story's humor is appropriate.
11. When Mrs. Turpin returns home bruised, a hired African American woman tells her that nothing really "bad" happened: "You just had you a little fall" (para. 147). Pay particular attention to the suggestive language of this sentence, and discuss its significance in relation to the rest of the story.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Mary Grace with Hulga of "Good Country People" (p. 392).
2. Explain how "Revelation" could be used as a title for any of the O'Connor stories you have read.
3. Discuss Mrs. Turpin's prideful hypocrisy in connection with the racial attitudes expressed by the white men at the "smoker" in Ellison's "Battle Royal" (p. 223). How do pride and personal illusions inform these characters' racial attitudes?
4. Explore the nature of the "revelation" in O'Connor's story and in John Updike's "A & P" (p. 576).

PERSPECTIVES ON O'CONNOR

O'Connor on Faith

1955

I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic. This is a fact and nothing covers it like the bald statement. However, I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, the thing Jung° describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level. I think that the Church is the only thing that is

Jung: Carl Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist.

seem that for O'Connor, given the fact of original Sin, any intelligence determined on its own supremacy was intrinsically evil. For in each work, it is the impulse toward secular autonomy, the smug confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts, that she sets out to destroy, through an act of violence so intense that the character is rendered helpless, a passive victim of a superior power. Again and again she creates a fiction in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to what she calls "reality" — the recognition of helplessness in the face of contingency, and the need for absolute submission to the power of Christ.

From "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision" in *American Literature*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. Choose an O'Connor story, and explain how grace — the divine influence from God that redeems a person — is used in it to transform a character.
2. Which O'Connor characters can be accurately described as having an "evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy" (para. 2)? Choose one character, and write an essay explaining how this description is central to the conflict of the story.
3. Compare an O'Connor story with one of Hawthorne's "in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to . . . 'reality' — the recognition of helplessness in the face of contingency . . ." (para. 2).

EDWARD KESSLER (B. 1927)

On O'Connor's Use of History

1986

In company with other Southern writers . . . who aspire to embrace a lost tradition and look on history as a repository of value, Flannery O'Connor seems a curious anomaly. She wrote of herself: "I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness . . . unhistorical, solitary, and guilty." Likewise her characters comprise a gallery of misfits isolated in a present and sentenced to a lifetime of exile from the human community. In O'Connor's fiction, the past neither justifies nor even explains what is happening. If she believed, for example, in the importance of the past accident that maimed Joy in "Good Country People," she could have demonstrated how the event predetermined her present rejection of both human and external nature; but Joy's past is parenthetical: "Mrs. Hopewell excused this attitude because of the leg (which had been shot off in a hunting accident when Joy was ten)." Believing that humankind is fundamentally flawed, O'Connor spends very little time constructing a past for her characters. The cure is neither behind us nor before us but within us; therefore, the past — even historical time itself — supplies only a limited base for self-discovery.

From *Flannery O'Connor and the Language of Apocalypse*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

Consider how O'Connor uses history in any one of her stories in this anthology and compare that "unhistorical" vision with Hawthorne's in

2. Write an essay in which you discuss Kessler's assertion that for O'Connor the "past is parenthetical," in contrast to most southern writers, who "embrace a lost tradition and look on history as a repository of value." For your point of comparison choose either William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (p. 72) or "Barn Burning" (p. 481).

TWO COMPLEMENTARY CRITICAL READINGS

A. R. COULTHARD (B. 1940)

On the Visionary Ending of "Revelation"

1983

The second part of the story does not keep pace with its rollicking opening, but its psychological realism gives Mrs. Turpin's ultimate redemption a hard-edged credibility. When the protagonist returns home, her first impulse is, quite naturally, to resist the message of grace brought by the girl: "I am not," she said tearfully, 'a wart hog. From hell.' But the denial had no force." Unable to reject the charge, Mrs. Turpin turns to resentment: "The message had been given to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard-working, church-going woman. The tears dried. Her eyes began to burn instead with wrath." Next she attempts to exorcise the girl's demonic words by confessing them to her black fieldhands:

"She said," she began again and finished this time with a fierce rush of breath, "that I was an old wart hog from hell."

There was an astounded silence.

"Where she at?" the youngest woman cried in a piercing voice.

"Lemme see her. I'll kill her!"

"I'll kill her with you!" the other one cried.

"She b'long in the sylum," the old woman said emphatically. "You the sweetest white lady I know."

"She pretty too," the other two said. "Stout as she can be and sweet. Jesus satisfied with her!"

"Deed he is," the woman declared.

Idiots! Mrs. Turpin growled to herself.

This little scene is both funny and thematically significant. Mrs. Turpin's refusal to accept the phony image of herself as a good woman offered by the blacks is a step toward facing the truth.

Mrs. Turpin's next step is literal. She climbs the hill to the hogpen, apparently considering it the appropriate place to reason out the meaning of being called a wart hog from hell. Once there, Ruby gets right down to business: "What do you send me a message like that for?" she demands. "How am I a hog and me both?" Then she yells, "Go on, call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell." She ends her harangue by hilariously roaring at God, "Who do you think you are?" In this scene, Ruby begins to grow into a sympathetic, even lovable, character. As O'Connor said, "You got to be a very big woman to shout at the Lord across a hogpen." You also got to be a very

God answers Mrs. Turpin by sending her an epiphany which is so unobtrusively presented that at first it seems to be only description: "A tiny truth

Claud's, appeared on the highway, heading rapidly out of sight. Its gear scraped thinly. It looked like a child's toy. At any moment a bigger truck might smash into it and scatter Claud's and the niggers' brains all over the road." The answer to Ruby's question is that God is omnipotent and that Ruby, like all mortals, is an insignificant, vulnerable creature whose life can end at any moment. Her response to this new knowledge is immediate: "Then like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor at the hogs."

The story originally ended at this point, but O'Connor decided that "something else was needed." Fortunately, what she added is not a concluding mini-sermon but a supernatural vision which is perfectly in keeping with the serio-comic tone of the story:

A visionary light settled in her eyes . . . a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those . . . like herself and Claud. . . . They were marching behind the others with great dignity. . . . They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

This vision demolishes Ruby's earlier neat ranking of people, and its concluding sentence, which could have quotation marks around "virtues," completes her education by telling her that no one deserves grace and that we receive it only because of God's mysterious mercy. The epiphany takes, and the story ends with Ruby, "her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead," prepared to face a humbler and more demanding life.

Though at least one reader whom O'Connor respected found "Revelation" pessimistic and considered the protagonist evil, O'Connor's main worry was that the story would "be taken to be one designed to make fun of Ruby," probably because her weaknesses are so vividly shown. But the great achievement of the protagonist's characterization is that Ruby Turpin retains her humanity to the end and does not, upon receiving grace, turn into an inspirational symbol. At the same time, O'Connor has made her conversion believable by dramatizing it in action and dialogue consistent with both Mrs. Turpin's humorous traits and her serious role in the story. "Revelation" is not only a delightful comedy but a profound dramatization of redemption as well.

From *American Literature*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. According to Coulthard, how does O'Connor avoid turning the end of the story into a "mini-sermon" (para. 5)?
2. How would your response to the story be different if it ended as O'Connor first intended it to — without the concluding paragraph? How would you regard Mrs. Turpin if this paragraph did not appear in the story?
3. Write an essay in response to this judgment of "Revelation": "Religion and comedy don't mix; therefore, the comic tone of 'Revelation' is inappropriate to the concluding religious epiphany."

MARSHALL BRUCE GENTRY (b. 1953)

On the Revised Ending of "Revelation"

1986

The precise significance of Mrs. Turpin's vision of hordes on a fiery bridge is not altogether a matter of critical agreement. And O'Connor's letters show her to have been inconsistent in her opinion of "Revelation" while she was writing it. It was the ending of the story that most troubled her, and the sequence of versions shows O'Connor trying to make clear that Ruby is not entirely corrupt. In a letter dated 25 December 1963, O'Connor mentioned that a friend who had read a draft of "Revelation" had called Mrs. Turpin "evil" and had suggested that O'Connor omit the final vision, which the friend considered to be a confirmation of Mrs. Turpin's evilness. O'Connor's reaction was, "I am not going to leave it out. I am going to deepen it so that there'll be no mistaking Ruby is not just an evil Glad Annie." As she finished revising the story, O'Connor made the final vision less obviously of Mrs. Turpin's making. One late draft, for example, contains the statement that the Turpins, "marching behind the others" toward heaven "with great dignity," were "driving them, in fact, ahead of themselves, still responsible as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior." In the published text, the Turpins are still at the end of the procession, but there is no mention of them "driving" the others on, and they are "accountable" rather than "still responsible." Another significant difference between the draft and the published text is the addition in the final version of the fact that Mrs. Turpin sees that her "virtues" are "being burned away." In both these revisions there is less emphasis on Mrs. Turpin's smug perspective, more emphasis on what shocks her.

The final version makes the vision more clearly redemptive, and one apparent implication of the revisions is that Mrs. Turpin's revelation is supernatural in origin. This implication is misleading, however; there is still much in Mrs. Turpin's vision to suggest that she produces it, and the primary effect of O'Connor's revisions is to make Mrs. Turpin's unconscious more clearly responsible for her vision of entry into a heavenly community. This view may seem peculiar when one considers Mrs. Turpin's bigotry and banality, but one's impression of that bigotry and banality is the result of the narrator's emphasis in describing Mrs. Turpin. The narrator emphasizes the ridiculous aspects of Mrs. Turpin rather than making fully apparent the tracks she has laid to carry herself to the oven in which individuality is renounced and the ideal of heavenly community achieved.

From *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. What reservations, according to Gentry, did O'Connor have about the story's ending? For what purpose did O'Connor revise the manuscript?
2. How does Gentry's reading of the ending compare with Coulthard's? Which reading do you find closer to your own? Why?
3. Write an essay that considers Gentry's final charge that Mrs. Turpin appears "ridiculous" at the end of the story in contrast to Coulthard's assessment that she "retains her humanity."

behaves and lives. Books that deal with people like in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* is the necessary metier. For various reasons, the average, struggling, non-morbid Negro is the best-kept secret in America. His revelation to the public is the thing needed to do away with that feeling of difference which inspires fear and which ever expresses itself in dislike.

It is inevitable that this knowledge will destroy many illusions and romantic traditions which America probably likes to have around. But then, we have no record of anybody sinking into a lingering death on finding out that there was no Santa Claus. The old world will take it in its stride. The realization that Negroes are no better nor no worse, and at times just as boring as everybody else, will hardly kill off the population of the nation.

Outside of racial attitudes, there is still another reason why this literature should exist. Literature and other arts are supposed to hold up the mirror to nature. With only this true picture of Negro art has been violated.

These are the representatives of the nation sufficiently. Let them

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"quaint" portrayed, a principle of national
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taken into considera-
[1950]

SHIRLEY JACKSON wrote this "biography of a story" in 1960 as a lecture to be delivered before reading "The Lottery" to college audiences. After her death it was included in Come Along with Me (1968), edited by her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. The lecture also contained extensive quotations from letters she had received from readers who took the story literally. These so disgusted Jackson that she promised her listeners at the conclusion of her talk, "I am out of the lottery business for good."

SHIRLEY JACKSON

The Morning of June 28, 1948, and "The Lottery"

On the morning of June 28, 1948, I walked down to the post office in our little Vermont town to pick up the mail. I was quite casual about it, as I recall — I opened the box, took out a couple of bills and a letter or two, talked to the postmaster for a few minutes, and left, never supposing that it was the last time for months that I was to pick up the mail without an active feeling of panic. The next week I had had to change my mailbox to the largest one in the post office, and casual conversation with the postmaster was out of the question. Because he wasn't speaking to me June 28, 1948 was the day *The*

New Yorker came out with a story of mine in it. It was not my first published story, nor my last, but I have been assured over and over that if it had been the only story I ever wrote or published, there would be people who would not forget my name.

I had written the story three weeks before, on a bright June morning when summer seemed to have come at last, with blue skies and warm sun and no heavenly signs to warn me that my morning's work was anything but just another story. The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller — it was, as I say, a warm morning, and the hill was steep, and beside my daughter the stroller held the day's groceries — and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards up the hill put an edge to the story; at any rate, I had the idea fairly clearly in my mind when I put my daughter in her playpen and the frozen vegetables in the refrigerator, and, writing the story, I found that it went quickly and easily, moving from beginning to end without pause. As a matter of fact, when I read it over later I decided that except for one or two minor corrections, it needed no changes, and the story I finally typed up and sent off to my agent the next day was almost word for word the original draft. This, as any writer of stories can tell you, is not a usual thing. All I know is that when I came to read the story over I felt strongly that I didn't want to fuss with it. I didn't think it was perfect, but I didn't want to fuss with it. It was, I thought, a serious, straightforward story, and I was pleased and a little surprised at the ease with which it had been written; I was reasonably proud of it, and hoped that my agent would sell it to some magazine and I would have the gratification of seeing it in print.

My agent did not care for the story, but — as she said in her note at the time — her job was to sell it, not to like it. She sent it at once to *The New Yorker*, and about a week after the story had been written I received a telephone call from the fiction editor of *The New Yorker*; it was quite clear that he did not really care for the story, either, but *The New Yorker* was going to buy it. He asked for one change — that the date mentioned in the story be changed to coincide with the date of the issue of the magazine in which the story would appear, and I said of course. He then asked, hesitantly, if I had any particular interpretation of my own for the story; Mr. Harold Ross, then the editor of *The New Yorker*, was not altogether sure that he understood the story, and wondered if I cared to enlarge upon its meaning. I said no. Mr. Ross, he said, thought that the story might be puzzling to some people, and in case anyone telephoned the magazine, as sometimes happened, or wrote in asking about the story, was there anything in particular I wanted them to say? No, I said, nothing in particular; it was just a story I wrote.

I had no more preparation than that. I went on picking up the mail every morning, pushing my daughter up and down the hill in her stroller, anticipating pleasurably the check from *The New Yorker*, and shopping for groceries. The weather stayed nice and it looked as though it was going to be a good summer. Then, on June 28, *The New Yorker* came out with my story.

Things began mildly enough with a note from a friend in *The New Yorker*: "Your story has kicked up quite a fuss around the office," he wrote. I was flattered: it's nice to think that your friends notice what you write. Later that day

there was a call from one of the magazine's editors; they had had a couple of people phone in about my story, he said, and was there anything I particularly wanted him to say if there were any more calls? No, I said, nothing particular; anything he chose to say was perfectly all right with me; it was just a story.

I was further puzzled by a cryptic note from another friend: "Heard a man talking about a story of yours on the bus this morning," she wrote. "Very exciting. I wanted to tell him I knew the author, but after I heard what he was saying I decided I'd better not."

One of the most terrifying aspects of publishing stories and books is the realization that they are going to be read, and read by strangers. I had never fully realized this before, although I had of course in my imagination dwelt lovingly upon the thought of the millions and millions of people who were going to be uplifted and enriched and delighted by the stories I wrote. It had simply never occurred to me that these millions and millions of people might be so far from being uplifted that they would sit down and write me letters I was downright scared to open; of the three-hundred-odd letters that I received that summer I can count only thirteen that spoke kindly to me, and they were mostly from friends. Even my mother scolded me: "Dad and I did not care at all for your story in *The New Yorker*," she wrote sternly, "it does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all you young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up?"

By mid-July I had begun to perceive that I was very lucky indeed to be safely in Vermont, where no one in our small town had ever heard of *The New Yorker*, much less read my story. Millions of people, and my mother, had taken a pronounced dislike to me.

The magazine kept no track of telephone calls, but all letters addressed to me care of the magazine were forwarded directly to me for answering, and all letters addressed to the magazine — some of them addressed to Harold Ross personally; these were the most vehement — were answered at the magazine and then the letters were sent me in great batches, along with carbons of the answers written at the magazine. I have all the letters still, and if they could be considered to give any accurate cross section of the reading public, or the reading public of *The New Yorker*, or even the reading public of one issue of *The New Yorker*, I would stop writing now.

Judging from these letters, people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at. Many of the writers were positive that *The New Yorker* was going to ridicule them in print, and the most cautious letters were headed, in capital letters: NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR PLEASE DO NOT PRINT THIS LETTER, OR, AT BEST, THIS LETTER MAY BE PUBLISHED AT YOUR USUAL RATES OF PAYMENT. Anonymous letters, of which there were a few, were destroyed. *The New Yorker* never published any comment of any kind about the story in the magazine, but did issue one publicity release saying that the story had received more mail than any piece of fiction they had ever published; this was after the newspapers had gotten into the act, in midsummer, with a front-page story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* begging to know what the story meant, and a series of columns in *New York* and *Chicago* papers

Curiously, there are three main themes which dominate the letters of that first summer — three themes which might be identified as bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse. In the years since then, during which the story has been anthologized, dramatized, televised, and even — in one completely mystifying transformation — made into a ballet, the tenor of letters I receive has changed. I am addressed more politely, as a rule, and the letters largely confine themselves to questions like what does this story mean? The general tone of the early letters, however, was a kind of wide-eyed, shocked innocence. People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch. [1968]

HENRY JAMES wrote his essay "The Art of Fiction" to elucidate his practice as a novelist, but his statement about his approach to writing long prose narratives also applies to his creation of short stories. James emphasized the importance of the imagination of fiction writers, their "power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things" as their most powerful gift as practitioners of "the art of fiction."

HENRY JAMES

From "The Art of Fiction"

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel, without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting. That general responsibility rests upon it, but it is the only one I can think of. The ways in which it is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable, and such as can only suffer from being marked out or fenced in by prescription. They are as various as the temperament of man, and they are successful in proportion as they reveal a particular mind, different from others. A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact: then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones and resemblances. Then in a word we can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality. We

She is suspicious, silent, and quite unwilling to gloss over a lifetime's trials and sorrows. There are marvelous exchanges as he coaxes her and, in the course of the story, calls her a succession of bittersweet names that provide the story's continuity: Mrs. Word-Miser, Mrs. Take It Easy, Mrs. Telepathy, Mrs. In a Hurry, Mrs. Excited Over Nothing. She parries his thrusts and lets him plan, involving her in his hopes for a new life. They will move to one of those "havens" for the elderly. But in the clutch she says no; she is tired, and she will not go along with him. She seems to know that she is sick and will soon die. She has a critical detachment with respect to him, their children, and grandchildren (never mind the world at large) that contrasts with the immediacy and warmth of his response to people, places, and things. A husband and wife in America — old, full of memories, scarred by a life that was not easy either materially or psychologically, and now compelled to face their last challenge together. Tell me a riddle, the granddaddy, how can she when she has learned hers and maybe everyone's, is a burden only have silent reveries, occasions for the poet. And the grandfather's bravado to face death, his wife's and his own ever disposition or station in life, ma-

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Since the collection *Tell Me a Riddle* was published fifteen years ago, Tillie Olsen has not come out with more short stories. She was forty-seven then and is now in her sixties. Her own life is well worth knowing. She was the Nebraska-born daughter of a Socialist organizer and worked for years in factories. She married a union man, a printer, and fought alongside him in a long series of working-class struggles during the 1930s and 1940s. She also brought up four children, and being poor and a conscientious political activist, she had little or no spare time for the writing she yet craved to do. She has written about herself and much more in two essays, "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," and "Women Who Are Writers in Our Century: One Out of Twelve." She is (and has been for decades) a feminist — unyielding and strong-minded but never hysterical or shrill. Her essays reveal her to be brilliant, forceful and broadly educated, if without degrees to wave around. She also published in 1974 the novel *Yonnondio* about working-class life in the 1930s — its terrible, lacerating reality. And she has written a long biographical interpretation to accompany a reissue by the Feminist Press of Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, originally issued in 1861.

At times, in a confessional vein not unlike that of "I Stand Here Ironing," she has allowed herself a moment of regret, if not self-pity: if only there had been more time, an easier life, and hence more stories, novels, and essays written. Proud and stoic, though, she pulls back immediately: that is how it goes — and besides, for others, for the overwhelming majority of the world's people, in the past and now too, there has been no spare time, no chance for anything like writing or constructing stories and in them giving expression to ideas and ideals. She need not, however, have one moment of regret. Others have succumbed more, but she has never once faltered. It is as if she had no time for failure either. Everything she has written has become almost immediately

a classic — the short stories especially, but also her two essays, her comment on the life and writing of Rebecca Harding Davis, and her novel. She has been spared celebrity, but hers is a singular talent that will not let go of one, a talent that prompts tears. She offers an artist's compassion and forgiveness but makes plain how fierce the various struggles must continue to be. [1975]

STEPHEN CRANE wrote about the wreck of the *Commodore* in the article "Stephen Crane's Own Story" in the *New York Press* on January 7, 1897. At that time arms and provisions were being smuggled from Florida to Cuba to aid the insurrection against Spanish rule. Crane boarded the *Commodore* in Jacksonville on December 31, 1896. The ship was loaded with a cargo of rifles and ammunition. As the scholar Olov W. Fryckstedt explained, Crane "looked forward to a long period of unknown adventures and exciting dangers in the Cuban mountains. But during the night of January 1 the ship foundered fifteen miles off the coast of Florida after a mysterious explosion in the engine room." The first part of Crane's newspaper story describes the loading of the ship, the peril of sandbars, the explosion in the engine room, and the lowering of the lifeboats. Then, with the ship's "whistle of despair," it became clear to everyone on board that the situation was hopeless. The bustling action before the shipwreck is the substance of Crane's newspaper report; his thirty desperate hours afterward in the ten-foot dinghy became the story of "The Open Boat."

STEPHEN CRANE

The Sinking of the Commodore

A WHISTLE OF DESPAIR

Now the whistle of the *Commodore* had been turned loose, and if there ever was a voice of despair and death, it was in the voice of this whistle. It had gained a new tone. It was as if its throat was already choked by the water, and this cry on the sea at night, with a wind blowing the spray over the ship, and the waves roaring over the bow, and swirling white along the decks, was to each of us probably a song of man's end.

It was now that the first mate showed a sign of losing his grip. To us who were trying in all stages of competence and experience to launch the lifeboat he raged in all terms of fiery satire and hammerlike abuse. But the boat moved at last and swung down toward the water.

Afterward, when I went aft, I saw the captain standing, with his arm in a sling, holding on to a stay with his one good hand and directing the launching of the boat. He gave me a five-gallon jug of water to hold. I asked me what I was going to do. I told him what I thought was about the proper thing, and

he told me then that the cook had the same idea, and ordered me to go forward and be ready to launch the ten-foot dinghy.

IN THE TEN-FOOT DINGHY

I remember well that he turned then to swear at a colored stoker who was prowling around, done up in life preservers until he looked like a feather bed. I went forward with my five-gallon jug of water, and when the captain came we launched the dinghy, and they put me over the side to fend her off from the ship with an oar.

They handed me down the water jug, and then the cook came into the boat, and we sat there in the darkness, wondering why, by all our hopes of future happiness, the captain was so long in coming over to the side and ordering us away from the doomed ship.

The captain was waiting for the other boat to go. Finally he hailed in the darkness: "Are you all right, Mr. Graines?"

The first mate answered: "All right, sir."

"Shove off, then," cried the captain.

The captain was just about to swing over the rail when a dark form came forward and a voice said, "Captain, I go with you."

The captain answered: "Yes, Billy; get in."

HIGGINS LAST TO LEAVE SHIP

It was Billy Higgins, the oiler. Billy dropped into the boat and a moment later the captain followed, bringing with him an end of about forty yards of lead line. The other end was attached to the rail of the ship.

As we swung back to leeward the captain said: "Boys, we will stay right near the ship till she goes down."

This cheerful information, of course, filled us all with glee. The line kept us headed properly into the wind, and as we rode over the monstrous waves we saw upon each rise the swaying lights of the dying *Commodore*.

When came the gray shade of dawn, the form of the *Commodore* grew slowly clear to us as our little ten-foot boat rose over each swell. She was floating with such an air of buoyancy that we laughed when we had time, and said, "What a gag it would be on those other fellows if she didn't sink at all."

But later we saw men aboard of her, and later still they began to hail us.

HELPING THEIR MATES

I had forgot to mention that previously we had loosened the end of the lead line and dropped much further to leeward. The men on board were a mystery to us, of course, as we had seen all the boats leave the ship. We rowed back to the ship, but did not approach too near, because we were four men in a ten-foot boat, and we knew that the touch of a hand on our gunwale would assuredly save us.

The first mate cried out from the ship that the third boat had foundered alongside. He cried that they had made rafts, and wished us to tow them.

The captain said, "All right."

Their rafts were floating astern. "Jump in!" cried the captain, but there was a singular and most harrowing hesitation. There were five white men and two negroes. This scene in the gray light of morning impressed one as would a view into some place where ghosts move slowly. These seven men on the stern of the sinking *Commodore* were silent. Save the words of the mate to the captain there was no talk. Here was death, but here also was a most singular and indefinable kind of fortitude.

Four men, I remember, clambered over the railing and stood there watching the cold, steely sheen of the sweeping waves.

"Jump," cried the captain again.

The old chief engineer first obeyed the order. He landed on the outside raft and the captain told him how to grip the raft and he obeyed as promptly and as docilely as a scholar in riding school.

THE MATE'S MAD PLUNGE

A stoker followed him, and then the first mate threw his hands over his head and plunged into the sea. He had no life belt and for my part, even when he did this horrible thing, I somehow felt that I could see in the expression of his hands, and in the very toss of his head, as he leaped thus to death, that it was rage, rage, rage unspeakable that was in his heart at the time.

And then I saw Tom Smith, the man who was going to quit filibustering after this expedition, jump to a raft and turn his face toward us. On board the *Commodore* three men strode, still in silence and with their faces turned toward us. One man had his arms folded and was leaning against the deckhouse. His feet were crossed, so that the toe of his left foot pointed downward. There they stood gazing at us, and neither from the deck nor from the rafts was a voice raised. Still was there this silence.

TRIED TO TOW THE RAFTS

The colored stoker on the first raft threw us a line and we began to tow. Of course, we perfectly understood the absolute impossibility of any such thing; our dinghy was within six inches of the water's edge, there was an enormous sea running, and I knew that under the circumstances a tugboat would have no light task in moving these rafts.

But we tried it, and would have continued to try it indefinitely, but that something critical came to pass. I was at an oar and so faced the rafts. The cook controlled the line. Suddenly the boat began to go backward and then we saw this negro on the first raft pulling on the line hand over hand and drawing us to him.

He had turned into a demon. He was wild — wild as a tiger. He was crouched on this raft and ready to spring. Every muscle of him seemed to be turned into an elastic spring. His eyes were almost white. His face the face

of a lost man reaching upward, and we knew that the weight of his hand on our gunwale doomed us.

THE COMMODORE SINKS

The cook let go of the line. We rowed around to see if we could not get a line from the chief engineer, and all this time, mind you, there were no shrieks, no groans, but silence, silence and silence, and then the *Commodore* sank.

She lurched to windward, then swung afar back, righted and dove into the sea, and the rafts were suddenly swallowed by this frightful maw of the ocean. And then by the men on the ten-foot dinghy were words said that were still not words — something far beyond words.

The lighthouse of Mosquito Inlet stuck up above the horizon like the point of a pin. We turned our dinghy toward the shore.

The history of life in an open boat for thirty hours would no doubt be instructive for the young, but none is to be told here and now. For my part I would prefer to tell the story at once, because from it would shine the splendid manhood of Captain Edward Murphy and of William Higgins, the oiler, but let it suffice at this time to say that when we were swamped in the surf and making the best of our way toward the shore the captain gave orders amid the wildness of the breakers as clearly as if he had been on the quarter deck of a battleship.

John Kitchell of Daytona came running down the beach, and as he ran the air was filled with clothes. If he had pulled a single lever and undressed, even as the fire horses harness, he could not seem to me to have stripped with more speed. He dashed into the water and dragged the cook. Then he went after the captain, but the captain sent him to me, and then it was that he saw Billy Higgins lying with his forehead on sand that was clear of the water, and he was dead. [1897]

RALPH ELLISON gave an interview for the "Art of Fiction" series of the Paris Review that was reprinted in his volume of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964). In the introduction to that book he said that what is basic to the fiction writer's confrontation with the world is "converting experience into symbolic action. Good fiction is made of that which is real, and reality is difficult to come by. So much of it depends upon individual's willingness to discover his true self, upon his defining himself, — for the time being at least — against his background."

RALPH ELLISON

The Influence of Folklore on "Battle Royal"

Interviewer: Can you give us an example of the use of folklore in your own novel?

Ellison: Well, there are certain themes, symbols, and images which are based on folk material. For example, there is the old saying amongst Negroes: If you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can't be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge, and so on. In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North; this, as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom — the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open.

It took me a long time to learn how to adapt such examples of myth into my work — also ritual. The use of ritual is equally a vital part of the creative process. I learned a few things from Eliot, Joyce, and Hemingway, but not how to adapt them. When I started writing, I knew that in both *The Waste Land*¹ and *Ulysses*² ancient myth and ritual were used to give form and significance to the material; but it took me a few years to realize that the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way. In my first attempt at a novel — which I was unable to complete — I began by trying to manipulate the simple structural unities of *beginning, middle, and end*, but when I attempted to deal with the psychological strata — the images, symbols, and emotional configurations — of the experience at hand, I discovered that the unities were simply cool points of stability on which one could suspend the narrative line — but beneath the surface of apparently rational human relationships there seethed a chaos before which I was helpless. People rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with; these superstitions and their rationalizations become ritual as they govern behavior. The rituals become social forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art.

I don't know whether I'm getting this over or not. Let's put it this way: Take the "Battle Royal" passage in my novel, where the boys are blindfolded and forced to fight each other for the amusement of the white observers. This is a vital part of behavior pattern in the South, which both Negroes and whites thoughtlessly accept. It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of

¹A long, extremely influential poem (1922) by T. S. Eliot (1888–)

²Experimental novel (1922) by James Joyce (1882–1941).

played with Arno and M. Grosjean. He tried to take their picture but it wasn't easy. The girls stood on the front steps, hand-in-hand, mitten-to-mitten, while Arno was harnessed to a sled with curved runners. The red harness had once been worn by another Airedale, Ruby, who was smarter even than Arno.

M. Grosjean wanted Marie to sit down on the sled, hold the reins and look sideways at the camera. Marie clung to Berthe's coat. She was afraid that Arno would bolt into the Rue Saint-Denis, where there were streetcars. M. Grosjean lifted her off the sled and tried the picture a different way, with Berthe pretending to drive and Marie standing face-to-face with Arno. As soon as he set Marie on her feet, she began to scream. Her feet were cold. She wanted to be carried. Her nose ran; she felt humiliated. He got out his handkerchief, checked green and white, and wiped her whole face rather hard.

Just then his wife came to the front door with a dish of macaroni and cut-up sausages for Arno. She had thrown a sweater over her cotton housecoat; she was someone who never felt the cold. A gust of wind lifted her loose hair. M. Grosjean told her that the kid was no picnic. Berthe, picking up English fast, could not have repeated his exact words, but she knew what they meant.

Mme. Carette was still waiting for the money from the sale of the store. A brother-in-law helped with the rent, sending every month a generous postal order from Fall River. It was Mme. Carette's belief that God would work a miracle, allowing her to pay it all back. In the meantime, she did fine sewing. Once she was hired to sew a trousseau, working all day in the home of the bride-to-be. As the date of the wedding drew near she had to stay overnight.

Mme. Grosjean looked after the children. They sat in her front parlor, eating fried-egg sandwiches and drinking cream soda (it did not matter if they dropped crumbs) while she played a record of a man singing, "Dear one, the world is waiting for the sunrise."

Berthe asked, in French, "What is he saying?" Mme. Grosjean answered in English, "A well-known Irish tenor."

When Mme. Carette came home the next day, she gave the girls a hot bath, in case Mme. Grosjean had neglected their elbows and heels. She took Berthe in her arms and said she must never tell anyone their mother had left the house to sew for strangers. When she grew up, she must not refer to her mother as a seamstress, but say instead, "My mother was clever with her hands."

That night, when they were all three having supper in the kitchen, she looked at Berthe and said, "You have beautiful hair." She sounded so tired and stern that Marie, eating mashed potatoes and gravy, with a napkin under her chin, thought Berthe must be getting a scolding. She opened her mouth wide and started to howl. Mme. Carette just said, "Marie, don't cry with your mouth full."

Downstairs, Mme. Grosjean set up her evening chant, calling for Arno. "Oh, where have you got to?" she wailed to the empty backyard.

"The dog is the only thing keeping those two together," said Mme. Carette. "But a dog isn't the same as a child. A dog doesn't look after its masters in their old age. We shall see what happens to the marriage after Arno dies." No sooner had she said this than she covered her mouth and spoke through her fingers:

"God forgive my unkind thoughts." She propped her arm on each side of her plate, as the girls were forbidden to do, and let her face slide into her hands.

Berthe took this to mean that Arno was doomed. Only a calamity about to engulf them all could explain her mother's elbows on the table. She got down from her chair and tried to pull her mother's hands apart, and kiss her face. Her own tears ran into her long hair, down onto her starched piqué collar. She felt tears along her nose and inside her ears. Even while she sobbed out words of hope and comfort (Arno would never die) and promises of reassuring behavior (she and Marie would take care of Arno), tears could flow in so many directions.

Of course, M. Grosjean's house were frightened. The male creatures in his house were in Parc La-fontaine with Arno.

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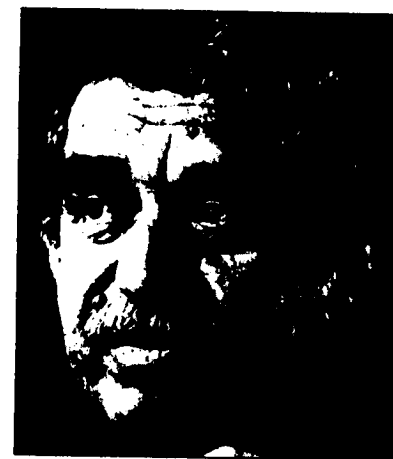
Gabriel García Márquez

A VERY OLD MAN WITH ENORMOUS WINGS

1955

TRANSLATED BY GREGORY RABASSA

Gabriel García Márquez, among the most eminent of living Latin American writers, was born in 1928 in Aracataca, a Caribbean port in Colombia, one of sixteen children of an impoverished telegraph operator. For a time he studied law in Bogotá, then became a newspaper reporter. Although he never joined the Communist party, García Márquez outspokenly advocated many left-wing proposals for reform. In 1954, despairing of any prospect for political change, he left Colombia to live in Mexico City. Though at nineteen he had already completed a book of short stories, *La hojorasca* (Leafstorm), he waited until 1955 to publish it. Soon he began to



Gabriel García Márquez

build a towering reputation among readers of Spanish. His celebrated novel, *Cien años de soledad* (1967), published in English as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1969), traces the history of a Colombian family through six generations. Called by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda "the greatest revelation in the Spanish language since Don Quixote," the book has sold more than twelve million copies in thirty languages. In 1982 García Márquez was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. His fiction, rich in myth and invention, has reminded American readers of the work of William Faulkner, another explorer of his native turf; indeed, García Márquez has called Faulkner "my master." His recent novels have included *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988), *The General in His Labyrinth* (1990), and *Of Love and Other Demons* (1995). His *Collected Stories* were published in 1994.

On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish. The light was so weak at noon that when Pelayo was coming back to the house after throwing away the crabs, it was hard for him to see what it was that was moving and groaning in the rear of the courtyard. He had to go very close to see that it was an old man, a very old man, lying face down in the mud, who, in spite of his tremendous efforts, couldn't get up, impeded by his enormous wings.

Frightened by that nightmare, Pelayo ran to get Elisenda, his wife, who was putting compresses on the sick child, and he took her to the rear of the courtyard. They both looked at the fallen body with mute stupor. He was dressed like a rag-picker. There were only a few faded hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth, and his pitiful condition of a drenched great-grandfather had taken away any sense of grandeur he might have had. His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked, were forever entangled in the mud. They looked at him so long and so closely that Pelayo and Elisenda very soon overcame their surprise and in the end found him familiar. Then they dared speak to him, and he answered in an incomprehensible dialect with a strong sailor's voice. That was how they skipped over the inconvenience of the wings and quite intelligently concluded that he was a lonely castaway from some foreign ship wrecked by the storm. And yet, they called in a neighbor woman who knew everything about life and death to see him, and all she needed was one look to show them their mistake.

"He's an angel," she told them. "He must have been coming for the child, but the poor fellow is so old that the rain knocked him down."

On the following day everyone knew that a flesh-and-blood angel was held captive in Pelayo's house. Against the judgment of the wise neighbor woman, for whom angels in those times were the fugitive survivors of a celestial conspiracy, they did not have the heart to club him to death. Pelayo watched over him all afternoon from the kitchen, armed with his bailiff's club, and before going to bed he dragged him out of the mud and locked him up with the hens in the wire chicken coop. In the middle of the night, when the rain stopped, Pelayo and Elisenda were still killing crabs. A short time afterward the child woke up without a fever and with a desire to eat. Then they felt magnanimous and decided to put the angel on a raft with fresh water and provisions for three days and leave him to his fate on the high seas. But when they went out into the courtyard with the first light of dawn, they found the whole neighborhood in front of the chicken coop having fun with the angel, without the slightest reverence, tossing him things to eat through the openings in the wire as if he weren't a supernatural creature but a circus animal.

Father Gonzaga arrived before seven o'clock, alarmed at the strange news. By that time onlookers less frivolous than those at dawn had already arrived and they were making all kinds of conjectures concerning the captive's future. The simplest among them thought that he should be named mayor of the world.

Others of sterner mind felt that he should be promoted to the rank of five-star general in order to win all wars. Some visionaries hoped that he could be put to stud in order to implant on earth a race of winged wise men who could take charge of the universe. But Father Gonzaga, before becoming a priest, had been a robust woodcutter. Standing by the wire, he reviewed his catechism in an instant and asked them to open the door so that he could take a close look at that pitiful man who looked more like a huge decrepit hen among the fascinated chickens. He was lying in a corner drying his open wings in the sunlight among the fruit peels and breakfast leftovers that the early risers had thrown him. Alien to the impertinences of the world, he only lifted his antiquarian eyes and murmured something in his dialect when Father Gonzaga went into the chicken coop and said good morning to him in Latin. The parish priest had his first suspicion of an impostor when he saw that he did not understand the language of God or know how to greet His ministers. Then he noticed that seen close up he was much too human: he had an unbearable smell of the outdoors, the back side of his wings were strewn with parasites and his main feathers had been mistreated by terrestrial winds, and nothing about him measured up to the proud dignity of angels. Then he came out of the chicken coop and in a brief sermon warned the curious against the risks of being ingenuous. He reminded them that the devil had the bad habit of making use of carnival tricks in order to confuse the unwary. He argued that if wings were not the essential element in determining the difference between a hawk and an airplane, they were even less so in the recognition of angels. Nevertheless, he promised to write a letter to his bishop so that the latter would write to his primate so that the latter would write to the Supreme Pontiff in order to get the final verdict from the highest courts.

His prudence fell on sterile hearts. The news of the captive angel spread with such rapidity that after a few hours the courtyard had the bustle of a marketplace and they had to call in troops with fixed bayonets to disperse the mob that was about to knock the house down. Elisenda, her spine all twisted from sweeping up so much marketplace trash, then got the idea of fencing in the yard and charging five cents admission to see the angel.

The curious came from far away. A traveling carnival arrived with a flying acrobat who buzzed over the crowd several times, but no one paid any attention to him because his wings were not those of an angel but, rather, those of a sidereal bat. The most unfortunate invalids on earth came in search of health: a poor woman who since childhood had been counting her heartbeats and had run out of numbers; a Portuguese man who couldn't sleep because the noise of the stars disturbed him; a sleepwalker who got up at night to undo the things he had done while awake; and many others with less serious ailments. In the midst of that shipwreck disorder that made the earth tremble, Pelayo and Elisenda were happy with fatigue, for in less than a week they had crammed their rooms with money and the line of pilgrims waiting their turn to enter still reached beyond the horizon.

The angel was the only one who took no part in his own act. He spent his time trying to get comfortable in his borrowed nest, befuddled by the hellish heat of the oil lamps and sacramental candles that had been placed along the wire. At first they tried to make him eat some mothballs, w/ according to the

wisdom of the neighbor woman, were the food prescribed for angels. But he turned them down, just as he turned down the papal lunches that the penitents brought him, and they never found out whether it was because he was an angel or because he was an old man that in the end ate nothing but eggplant mush. His only supernatural virtue seemed to be patience. Especially during the first days, when the hens pecked at him, searching for the stellar parasites that proliferated in his wings, and the cripples pulled out feathers to touch their defective parts with, and even the most merciful threw stones at him, trying to get him to rise so they could see him standing. The only time they succeeded in arousing him was when they burned his side with an iron for branding steers, for he had been motionless for so many hours that they thought he was dead. He awoke with a start, ranting in his hermetic language and with tears in his eyes, and he flapped his wings a couple of times, which brought on a whirlwind of chicken dung and lunar dust and a gale of panic that did not seem to be of this world. Although many thought that his reaction had been one not of rage but of pain, from then on they were careful not to annoy him, because the majority understood that his passivity was not that of a hero taking his ease but that of a cataclysm in repose.

Father Gonzaga held back the crowd's frivolity with formulas of maidservant inspiration while awaiting the arrival of a final judgment on the nature of the captive. But the mail from Rome showed no sense of urgency. They spent their time finding out if the prisoner had a navel, if his dialect had any connection with Aramaic, how many times he could fit on the head of a pin,^o or whether he wasn't just a Norwegian with wings. Those meager letters might have come and gone until the end of time if a providential event had not put an end to the priest's tribulations.

It so happened that during those days, among so many other carnival attractions, there arrived in town the traveling show of the woman who had been changed into a spider for having disobeyed her parents. The admission to see her was not only less than the admission to see the angel, but people were permitted to ask her all manner of questions about her absurd state and to examine her up and down so that no one would ever doubt the truth of her horror. She was a frightful tarantula the size of a ram and with the head of a sad maiden. What was most heart-rending, however, was not her outlandish shape but the sincere affliction with which she recounted the details of her misfortune. While still practically a child she had sneaked out of her parents' house to go to a dance, and while she was coming back through the woods after having danced all night without permission, a fearful thunderclap rent the sky in two and through the crack came the lightning bolt of brimstone that changed her into a spider. Her only nourishment came from the meatballs that charitable souls chose to toss into her mouth. A spectacle like that, full of so much human truth and with such a fearful lesson, was bound to defeat without even trying that of a haughty

fit on the head of a pin: this allusion refers to the famous medieval arguments about how many angels (who had no physical bodies) could dance on the head of a pin.

angel who scarcely deigned to look at mortals. Besides, the miracles attributed to the angel showed a certain mental disorder, like the blind man who didn't recover his sight but grew three new teeth, or the paralytic who didn't get to walk but almost won the lottery, and the leper whose sores sprouted sunflowers. Those consolation miracles, which were more like mocking fun, had already ruined the angel's reputation when the woman who had been changed into a spider finally crushed him completely. That was how Father Gonzaga was cured forever of his insomnia and Pelayo's courtyard went back to being as empty as during the time it had rained for three days and crabs walked through the bedrooms.

The owners of the house had no reason to lament. With the money they saved they built a two-story mansion with balconies and gardens and high netting so that crabs wouldn't get in during the winter, and with iron bars on the windows so that angels wouldn't get in. Pelayo also set up a rabbit warren close to town and gave up his job as bailiff for good, and Elisenda bought some satin pumps with high heels and many dresses of iridescent silk, the kind worn on Sunday by the most desirable women in those times. The chicken coop was the only thing that didn't receive any attention. If they washed it down with Creolin^o and burned tears of myrrh inside it every so often, it was not in homage to the angel but to drive away the dungheap stench that still hung everywhere like a ghost and was turning the new house into an old one. At first, when the child learned to walk, they were careful that he not get too close to the chicken coop. But then they began to lose their fears and got used to the smell, and before the child got his second teeth he'd gone inside the chicken coop to play, where the wires were falling apart. The angel was no less standoffish with him than with other mortals, but he tolerated the most ingenious infamies with the patience of a dog who had no illusions. They both came down with chicken pox at the same time. The doctor who took care of the child couldn't resist the temptation to listen to the angel's heart, and he found so much whistling in the heart and so many sounds in his kidneys that it seemed impossible for him to be alive. What surprised him most, however, was the logic of his wings. They seemed so natural on that completely human organism that he couldn't understand why other men didn't have them too.

When the child began school it had been some time since the sun and rain had caused the collapse of the chicken coop. The angel went dragging himself about here and there like a stray dying man. They would drive him out of the bedroom with a broom and a moment later find him in the kitchen. He seemed to be in so many places at the same time that they grew to think that he'd been duplicated, that he was reproducing himself all through the house, and the exasperated and unhinged Elisenda shouted that it was awful living in that hell full of angels. He could scarcely eat and his antiquarian eyes had also become so

Creolin: a brand of cleaning product.

foggy that he went about bumping into posts. All he had left were the bare *canulae*^o of his last feathers. Pelayo threw a blanket over him and extended him the charity of letting him sleep in the shed, and only then did they notice that he had a temperature at night, and was delirious with the tongue twisters of an old Norwegian. That was one of the few times they became alarmed, for they thought he was going to die and not even the wise neighbor woman had been able to tell them what to do with dead angels.

And yet he not only survived his worst winter, but seemed improved with the first sunny days. He remained motionless for several days in the farthest corner of the courtyard, where no one would see him, and at the beginning of December some large, stiff feathers began to grow on his wings, the feathers of a scarecrow, which looked more like another misfortune of decrepitude. But he must have known the reason for those changes, for he was quite careful that no one should notice them, that no one should hear the sea chanteys that he sometimes sang under the stars. One morning Elisenda was cutting some bunches of onions for lunch when a wind that seemed to come from the high seas blew into the kitchen. Then she went to the window and caught the angel in his first attempts at flight. They were so clumsy that his fingernails opened a furrow in the vegetable patch and he was on the point of knocking the shed down with the ungainly flapping that slipped on the light and couldn't get a grip on the air. But he did manage to gain altitude. Elisenda let out a sigh of relief, for herself and for him, when she saw him pass over the last houses, holding himself up in some way with the risky flapping of a senile vulture. She kept watching him even when she was through cutting the onions and she kept on watching until it was no longer possible for her to see him, because then he was no longer an annoyance in her life but an imaginary dot on the horizon of the sea.

canulae: the Latin word for tubes; it refers to the tubelike quills that attach feathers to a body.

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman

THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

1892

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) was born in Hartford, Connecticut. Her father was the writer Frederick Beecher Perkins (a nephew of reformer-novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and abolitionist minister Henry Ward Beecher), but he abandoned the family shortly after his daughter's birth. Raised in meager surroundings, the young Gilman adopted her intellectual Beecher aunts as role models. Because she and her mother moved from one relation to another, Gilman's early education was neglected—at fifteen she had had only four years of schooling. In 1878 she studied commercial art at the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1884 she married Walter Stetson, an artist. After the birth of her one daughter, she experienced a severe depression. The rest cure her doctor prescribed became the basis of her most famous story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." This tale combines standard elements of Gothic fiction (the isolated country mansion, the brooding atmosphere of the room, the aloof but dominating husband) with the fresh clarity of Gilman's feminist perspective. Gilman's first marriage ended in an amicable divorce. A celebrated essayist and public speaker, Gilman became an important early figure in American feminism. Her study, *Women and Economics* (1898), stressed the importance of both sexes having a place in the working world. Her feminist-Utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), describes a thriving nation of women without men. In 1900 Gilman married a second time—this time, more happily—to her cousin George Houghton Gilman. After his sudden death in 1934, Gilman discovered she had inoperable breast cancer. After finishing her autobiography, she killed herself with chloroform in Pasadena, California.



Charlotte Perkins Gilman

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

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the appliances. Norman DeLuca came out wearing a red bathrobe embroidered with fire-breathing Chinese dragons. The robe had billowing, half-length sleeves. Beads of water glistened on the dense black hair of DeLuca's forearms. "I'm calling the cops, asshole," he said. Hornbeck got into the truck and started it. He looked back at Bonnie. She was standing at the edge of her lawn, her grimly folded arms pressing her breasts flat.

Hornbeck exchanged thrusting middle fingers with Norman DeLuca, then put the truck into first gear and eased out the street a few hundred feet, hard, in reverse. When he was in gear again, he stomped on the brake pedal and dryer shuddering off the truck and into the street. The machines hit with grievous thuds and large pieces broke loose.

Later that day he was scheduled to go to Pomona to pick up a massaging recliner. An elderly woman had bought it three months ago but had yet to make her first payment. He imagined that she was on social security, a widow ignored by her middle-aged children, crippled with arthritis, and fed up with life. But not so fed up that she didn't want to retain a few creature comforts. He imagined himself having coffee in her kitchen, her shaky, knob-knuckled hands struggling with the pot. He imagined himself looking cautiously into her fogged eyes, half convinced he'd be able, now, to see the immortal parasite that thrived behind them. And it wouldn't matter. He'd make the back payments on her recliner anyway.

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Horizontal Snow

BECAUSE OF A snag in my thinking I lost interest in both vector analysis and differential equations and had to drop out of college and hitchhike home twelve credits short of graduation. Home was half a continent away and I didn't have a car or bus money and was afraid to ask my folks for help. They had paid my way through three and a half years of engineering school at Platteville, Wisconsin, and I couldn't have said to Dad, for instance, that I wanted to come home because the laws of thermodynamics bored the life out of me. He wouldn't have understood my reasoning.

I didn't have any reasoning. Something down at the underpinnings of reason had given way, and there was no explanation for it. I couldn't even explain it to myself. All I knew was that every time I opened a textbook something numbing, like pain, would stab the back of my head. Or my eyelids would feel thick, as if stuffed with sand. Or I would read the same page over ten, fifteen times and not one word would register.

I kissed my girlfriend goodbye, packed my suitcase, and headed for the highway west. "What's *wrong* with you?" she'd asked, and I had no answer. I'd hurt her, I was aware of that, but my own feelings were in cold storage. I observed her pain in the way a surgeon observes the pain of his patient: with compassion but without involvement or remorse. I was strong and healthy, my appetite was good, I slept well, but

nothing interested me. I felt like an animated corpse, moving through a world I had left behind. Greeting myself in the bathroom mirror each morning I would say: Hello, Zombie.

The first ride I hitched was with a family. They dropped me off on the far edge of Minnesota, in the middle of nowhere. It was a lonely stretch of road, and though the weather had been springlike for several weeks, the wind from Canada still had a threat of winter in it. My second ride came minutes before hypothermia set in.

A pickup truck with a homemade camper stuck on the back rolled to a gradual stop ahead of me. The camper was made of scrap wood and had a peaked roof, like a house, covered with tar paper. It looked like an outbuilding of a farm, modified for travel. The man driving said he was going all the way to Bonner's Ferry, Idaho, four hundred miles short of my destination. I hesitated before getting in because the man was so ugly he took my breath away. He may have been the ugliest man in the world. At least I had never seen anyone up to that time as ugly as he was, and I have not seen anyone uglier since. His face was flat as a skillet, even concave. His hammered-down nose was five fingers wide, and his short forehead had prominent supraorbital ridges thick as cables. He looked like something you'd see in an anthropology textbook, as if forty thousand years of evolution had skipped over him. This was 1958, and so much has happened since then that much of what follows seems more like a dream than personal history.

His name was Lot Stoner and he claimed to be a preacher. He drove slowly, under fifty, with both hands on the wheel. He had huge, amply scarred, thick-fingered hands that had seen decades of punishing work. We rode along without speaking for several hours, though now and then he would glance over at me and at the suitcase wedged between my legs. "I specialize in the defeated," he finally said. When I didn't respond to this, he went on to explain that he was a preacher of the gospel. He didn't have a church or a degree from a

recognized seminary, but was a self-taught man of God. "You just lost a big tussle, didn't you?" he said. He had yellowing, wide-spaced eyes. They were slightly wall-eyed so that when he looked at you directly it seemed as if he was seeing two of you—one slightly to the right, one slightly to the left. I guessed his age at about sixty, but his hair was bright red and youthful.

Again he waited for my response. I didn't have one. I shrugged and turned my gaze out the side window, where snow-patched fields drifted by.

"I saw defeat in your posture," he said, "while you were standing out there in the elements with your thumb out. I said to myself, 'Lot, there is a young buck who has been in the toilet. There is a boy who hit bottom but did not bounce.' Am I wrong?"

I didn't see myself as that bad off, but he was at least partly right. Articulated, the snag in my thinking went something like this: "The struggle is not worth the reward." It loomed in my mind like a huge door that had just shut, locking itself. I couldn't formulate it in words at the time, but I sensed that it had the clear-cut, irrefutable perfection of Einstein's discovery of the absolute equivalency of matter and energy. I had been an honors student headed for a job in the aerospace industry to help build rockets so that we could catch up to the Russians. Sputnik had been put into orbit the previous fall, and things did not look good for the U.S.A.

"Your hand looked like the hand of a mendicant, upraised for alms," Lot said. "I said to myself, 'Lot, there is a boy who has lost his way.' I am hardly ever off the target about such things."

Lot talked about himself for a while. He said he felt more like a traveling teacher than a pulpit-bound Bible thumper. He said he was too footloose to have his own church, and also that he was too broad-minded and generous with his Biblical interpretations to follow the narrow and self-interested theologies of the fat-cat denominations. He gave examples of

his broad-mindedness. "This may astound you, son," he said, "but I can see evidence of divinity in a cow pie, and again in the maggots that devour it." He reached under his seat and pulled out a microphone that had some wires dangling loosely from it. "Ain't that right, Willie?" he shouted into the mike.

A woman's voice crackled over a loudspeaker that was wedged between the seat and the back of the cab. "Ain't *what* right?" she said. She sounded sleepy and annoyed at being disturbed. I figured, correctly, that she was lying in a bunk back in the wood-slat-and-tar-paper camper.

"About me seeing the Almighty Himself in commonplace cow shit," Lot said into his microphone.

"Yeah," said the voice through an unrestrained yawn.

"I can see the Lord in all of it," he said. "In every piece of flotsam and jetsam, in every gnat and mosquito—there He is, doing business like He has every day for twenty billion years. History means nothing to Him. Yours, mine, or that of the damn fool nations."

Lot told me that he'd spent a good part of his life in prison. "I killed a man," he said. "I took his head into my hands and squeezed it until the pressure on his brain became intolerable. There were ruptures under the bone and then the bone itself gave way. He was stone dead before I released him, and the blood from his ears ran in abundance through my fingers. They said later they had to pry my fingers off of him with cold chisels and pliers. I had momentarily lost the sense of myself." He took his right hand off the wheel and showed it to me. The hard, walnut-size knuckles looked like the joints of a machine, the thick wrist timbered with straight shafts of bone.

He picked up his microphone. "Am I sorry? Tell him, Willie, if I am sorry."

"He ain't," Willie said.

"And I'll tell you why," Lot said. "The man deserved what he got. He was worthless. Worthless scum. I know I just told you I can see divinity in flotsam and jetsam. But this man was

below that. He was filled to capacity with nothing. He was nothingness incarnate. He was a hole in God's blue air."

"He's getting up steam," Willie's crackling voice warned from the loudspeaker.

We were in the flat rich farm country of central North Dakota, the landscape of boredom itself. A few years later, after having got past my motivational problems, I would be installing Minuteman missiles into this same wheatland for the U.S. Air Force.

"The man I killed was a two-legged lamprey," Lot said. "He attached himself to the helpless underbelly of good-hearted people and sucked their lifeblood from them until they were pale effigies of their former selves. He would fill his nothingness with their somethingness. He was a con artist who had taken my daddy's last dime for an electrical arthritis cure, coupled with painful injections of a useless saline solution. Can you blame me?"

"No," I said.

"And I accept no blame. But while I was up at the state farm I had myself a long time to ponder it. My meditations led me to the light, the holy light, pure and simple. And I am going to reveal this holy light to you, son, free of charge. Spreading the truth is my goal in life. I doff my cap to no sect, denomination, figurehead, or dogma. I do not take my notions from someone else's larder of so-called religious verities."

We passed a small lake and drove through a town where, four years later, I would betray my young wife by going to bed with a farmer's widow named Zola Faye Metkovich. My young wife would leave me, I would leave Zola Faye, but I would stay on at Minot Air Force Base, helping to redesign ICBM parts and support equipment that had failed their stress and endurance tests. I would make a lot of money, drive a big car—an air-conditioned Chrysler Imperial—and have a string of five girlfriends who lived far away from each other in the small isolated towns of North Dakota where people, though born in the United States of America, still spoke with

foreign accents, German and Russian. It would be the most exciting time of my life, but of course I did not know it, and could not have imagined it, as I bounced along toward Idaho with Lot Stoner and the unseen woman he called Willie.

Now and then, Lot would take a dried-out sandwich from a paper sack on the floorboards or lift a thermos to his lips. He offered these to me, but I refused. Food from his hand was automatically unappetizing, as if contaminated by his ugliness. He hummed to himself for a while, ate a little more, gazed out at the slow-moving scenery from time to time. It took me a while to realize that he'd quit talking, and that I had been waiting for him to reveal this holy-light business to me, not that I believed in such things or had ever given them much thought. I began to think that he'd just forgotten about it, or had something more pressing on his mind. And then it occurred to me that I was being conned, or that he was self-deluded, maybe even brain-damaged. I leaned my head against the window and pretended to doze off. And then I did doze off.

A crackling electrical scream woke me up. It was Willie, yelling for someone to come back to her.

Lot slowed the truck and pulled off onto the shoulder of the highway. "Go climb into the back and take a look, will you, son?" he said wearily. He crossed his arms on the wheel and rested his knobbed forehead on them. "I'll catch a couple of winks while you're back there."

I got out of the truck into a northern gale. The false spring was over. A new storm from the Arctic was blowing in. In these latitudes you can smell snow in the air. It's not so much a smell as it is a pinching in of your nose, a tightening of the membranes inside. You turn your face into the wind, lift your nose to it, sniff in. "Snow," you say to yourself. "Blizzard."

When I climbed into the camper I saw a narrow-faced woman with Indian cheekbones curled up under a heavy blan-

ket. She had thin, stringy hair, and her hunted eyes looked like those of a trapped wolverine.

"Come here, dammit," she said.

She was lying on a bunk that ran the length of the camper. There was an electric light glowing in the ceiling. The only other light came through the back door, which I left open. She was trying to push herself up on her elbows.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Lift me up," she said through gritted teeth.

She was young. Maybe twenty, but probably closer to seventeen. I slid a hand behind her back and muscled her forward. "Quit it," she said. "I just needed to get up a little so's I can get set. It's coming."

She scooted forward a little, then lay back down. Her knees were up and her belly was very big. She pulled the blanket aside and her naked belly rose up, tight and shiny.

"You're having a baby," I said.

"You don't say," she said. She spread her knees and screamed, loud and terrible, more rage in it than pain. I stepped back and my head hit the roof. Her microphone was on the floor, next to her bunk. I picked it up.

"She's having a baby, Lot," I said.

"Joy to the world," replied his weary voice from a tiny loudspeaker that had been stuck to the ceiling with electrician's tape.

I put the mike down. Willie was growling between clenched teeth, her head rolling side to side on her pillow. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked.

She waved her arm. It flapped like a broken wing. "Get me that pint-size green bottle out of the icebox," she said. "And don't be an asshole and faint."

We looked at each other for a few seconds. If anything, my heart was beating slower. "Don't worry," I said.

The icebox was a homemade affair with a heavy lid fitted into its top. Among cans of soda and beer and packages of food were a half-dozen pint bottles of gin. I took one of these

out and uncapped it. She took a long pull from it, and then I did the same. It was cold in my mouth and warm going down.

"Glory, glory," said Lot, his grainy voice dropping like sand from the ceiling.

"Maybe you ought to be back here with your wife," I said into the microphone.

"We all can't fit back there, son," he said. "There's not that much to do, anyway. You just do what the girl tells you. She ain't new at this."

Wind from Canada mauled the truck. It howled in the wooden slats of the camper. I looked out the door and saw the blizzard, the horizontal snow.

"Give me your hand," Willie said. She squeezed hard enough to make the separate bones touch. The skin of her stomach was pulled so tight I could see my shadowy reflection in it. "Take a look, will you?" she said. "I want to know if he's coming out ass end first. I had two others that did, both stillborns."

She let go of my hand and I moved down to the foot of the bunk and peered between her upraised knees. There, at the dark joining of her thighs, was a little face. It looked like a dried apple. Crimped as it was in those bearded jaws, it looked Chinese and ancient. Its eyes were shut tight, the mouth a stubborn line. The unbreathing nose was flat and wide. The idea occurred to me that this wasn't an infant at all but a tiny old man who had serious second thoughts about the wisdom of leaving the comfortable and nourishing dark for the starved light of North Dakota. The notion made me smile. "Welcome home, chump," I whispered.

"Well?" Willie said. "Is it coming out frontwards of backwards?"

"Frontwards," I said. "Frontwards," I repeated into the mike. "And I think it's got red hair."

"I'm kissing the Good Book," said Lot.

Once the head cleared the birth canal, the rest was easy. Willie leaned forward and took the baby up in her arms,

nipped the cord with her teeth, tied it off with a length of nylon fishing line, and wrapped him in the blanket. A small cry—more like the ratchety chirping of a newly hatched bird than that of a baby—came from the blanket. I wiped the sweat off Willie's face with my handkerchief, and she took another swig of gin.

"You're a nice fella," Willie said, smiling up at me.

I thought about that. "I don't think so," I said.

I went back up to the cab. "Fatherhood," Lot said, "is a great responsibility." He gave me a sidelong look of high significance, his off-center eyes splitting me into twins. Then he started the truck and we moved down the white highway.

"You probably ought to get them to a hospital," I said. "Or at least to a doctor."

"We'll stop in Minot," he said. "We'll get some warm food and a place to rest. Doctors aren't important to our thinking. Are they to yours?"

I looked at him, but he was squinting out into the painfully bright air of the storm. "Yes, I think so," I said.

"Someday you'll wake up out of your little nightmare and click your heels, son," he said, shifting down to second as snowdrifts began to collect in the road. He picked up his microphone and said, "What are we going to name him, Willie?"

"Jesus Dakota Stoner," Willie said without hesitating a beat.

"Merry Christmas," Lot hooted into the mike.

"We'll call him J.D. for short," Willie said.

Lot drove even slower as night came on and the blizzard got worse. We stopped in Rugby, an hour or so short of Minot, at an all-night café called Mud and Sinkers. Lot pulled a tobacco can out from under the seat. It was packed with dollar bills. He counted out five, smoothed them out on his thigh. "We'll get us some coffee and doughnuts and sit out this storm."

When it gets light, we'll hit the road again."

We found a booth near the warm kitchen and a waitress brought us coffee and three glazed doughnuts. Willie had Jesus Dakota tucked in a blanket. The dried blood and mucus of his recent birth still mottled his skin, which otherwise would have been a bright saffron-pink, but Willie didn't seem too concerned. She opened her wool shirt and drew out a long thin breast and gave it to the baby. The baby hadn't been crying, but he pulled at his mother with urgent power.

"It'll be good to get home," I said, for conversation's sake, but I said it mostly to myself.

"J.D.'s home already," Lot chuckled. "Home is a warm teat, wherever you happen to be."

"Seattle," I said. "That's home for me."

Lot sipped his coffee, squinted at me through the steam. "Better to be in exile sustained by a dream of home than to endure the disappointments of home itself. Home itself is an idea that never measures up. I speak from experience."

"You're too deep for me, Lot," I said.

"Don't mock him," Willie said. She said it simply, without taking her eyes off her baby.

"You'll find one day that what I said is true," Lot said.

And what good will it do me? I wanted to say, but held back. I was tired and a little fed up with his homespun homilies. I wanted to be back in West Seattle, in my parent's big house overlooking the Sound. I wanted to be in my upstairs room, at my desk, watching the ferryboats at night brilliantly spangled with lights. I wanted to listen to the lonesome call of their foghorns while snuggling deeper and deeper into my old bed.

There were some names etched by knifeblade into the table before me. Rena + Yank. Pete + Vicki. Remember Me, Annette. I concentrated on those names and sipped my coffee, willing the night to pass quickly. I would come back to Mud and Sinkers four years later as a Boeing field engineer, after completing my degree at the University of Washington, the

snag in my thinking long gone and forgotten. Carline Minsky from the town of Balfour would be with me, and those carved names would still be here, among half a dozen more. Carline was pregnant and wanted to get married, but I told her I already was married—even though my wife had left several months earlier. Carline broke down, but what could I do? I said I'd pay for the abortion. She took the money, but our little romantic episode ended then and there. Maybe she got the abortion and maybe she didn't. I never found out, nor wanted to.

We'd gotten carried away down in a silo, next to a recently installed Minuteman missile. We were on a service platform, adjacent to the missile's third-stage motor, near the warhead access ramp. and Carline said, "Let's do it, right here." She wasn't supposed to be in this Top Secret area, but there was no one else around within miles who might object. "This motor is fueled by a ton of nitro glycerine, stabilized by cotton filaments," I told her. "It's very dangerous." This was a partial truth, but it made her moan with fear and excitement. We did it standing up, her bending over the rail and leaning out close enough to the Minuteman to kiss the megaton hydrogen warhead. "I'm so hot," she said, and I was too. *Too* hot, it turned out, because we neglected the usual precautions, and she got pregnant, somewhere under North Dakota.

"I saw something else in your posture," Lot said, startling me. He was slumped over on his side in the booth, and I thought he'd been asleep. "I saw something besides defeat, or maybe it wasn't defeat I saw at all. Maybe it was this other thing all along."

I held a picture of blue water and white boats in my mind, so as not to get caught up again in his stagey pronouncements.

"Don't you care to know what I saw?" he said.

Willie stirred. Jesus Dakota turned his face left and right before finding the breast she half-consciously offered him.

"Not especially," I said.

"I'm going to tell you anyway. I saw a dangerous hunger. I saw an unfeedable hunger."

His primitive head, his bright red hair, the fatigue that lined his face—the complete aspect of an outcast and loser. I smiled and shook my head, affecting dismay.

"You were going to tell me something about a holy light. You must have forgotten," I said.

The need for sleep pulled him lower in the booth. He closed his eyes. "I already did. You weren't paying attention, son."

After a while, they were all sound asleep, that odd and aimless family with no future and a harrowing past. Even when a trucker came stomping into the café, kicking snow off his boots, flapping his arms against his chest, and cursing the storm at the top of his lungs, Lot, Willie, and Jesus Dakota didn't wake up. It was 3:00 A.M., and the trucker ordered hot cakes and coffee. He talked constantly at the waitress, and from this I learned that he was on his way to the West Coast. I saw my chance and sat next to him at the counter. He was a tall, thin, nervous man, but he was friendly. He was a talker who was starved for conversation, and so when I asked if I could ride along with him to the Coast, he said "Just don't ask me to stop every fifty miles so you can piss. I've got to make Tacoma by tomorrow afternoon."

I went back to the booth. Willie had scooted over so that my coat was partly under her. I didn't want to wake her up, so I just left it there. It was just an unlined windbreaker anyway. I took one last look at them. I hoped they'd make it to Bonners Ferry, but given what they were it didn't seem to matter much where they wound up. They'd be back on the road again before long, the road being the only place where they would feel welcome.

In the truck, a huge Diamond T hauling double trailers, the driver said, "Who was that ugly fuck and the bony squaw you were with?"

"Just a ride," I said, tossing my suitcase behind the seat.

The trucker poured himself a cup of coffee from a thermos.

shook two white pills from a small envelope. He placed the pills carefully on his tongue, then swallowed them with coffee.

"Got to jump-start my fucking *brain*," he said, winking.

Then we roared out into the blinding storm.

SLEEPWALK

AND OTHER STORIES

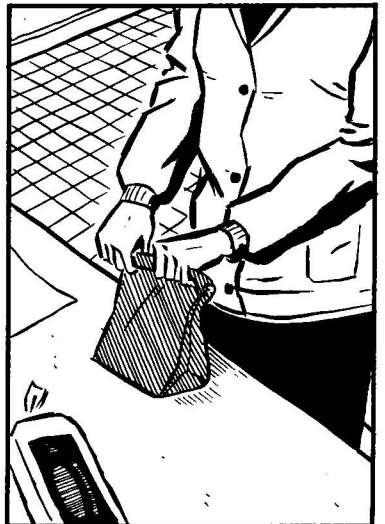
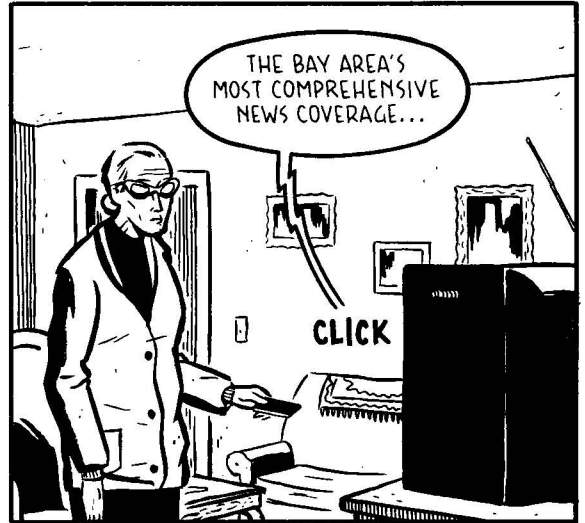
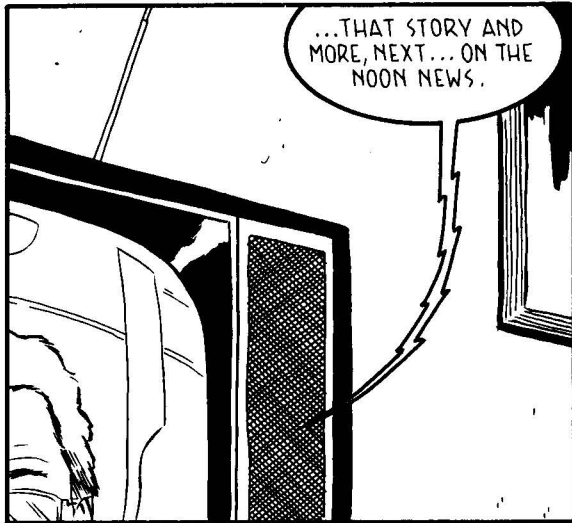
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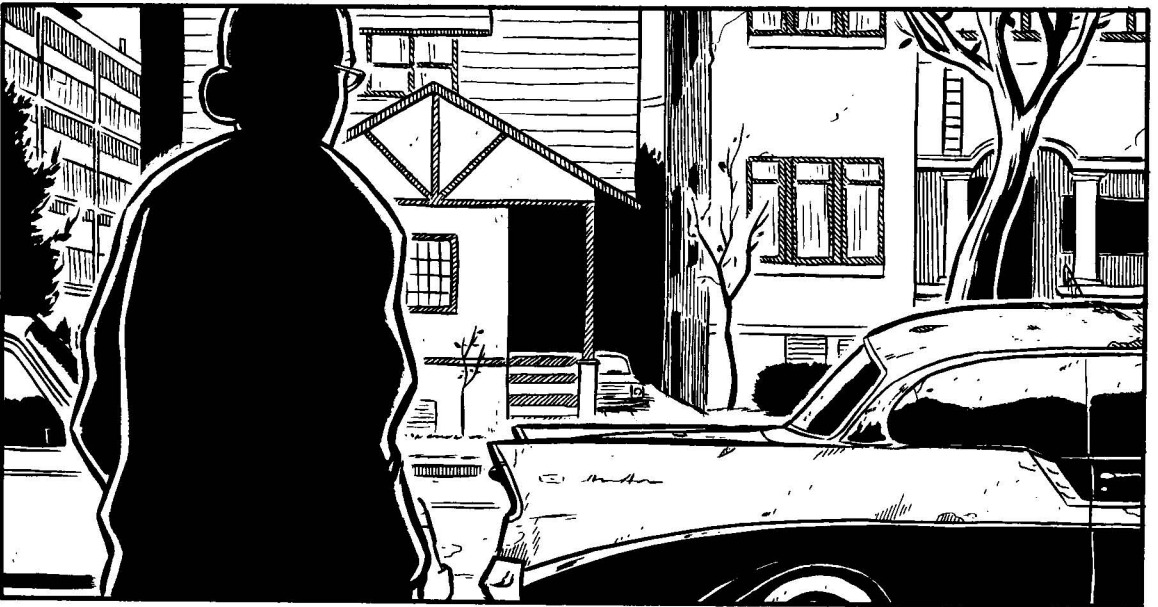
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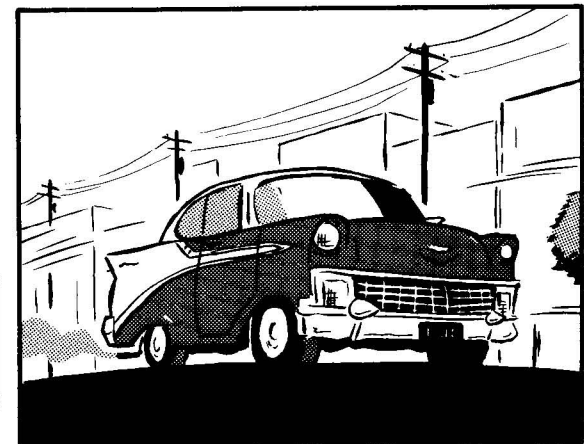
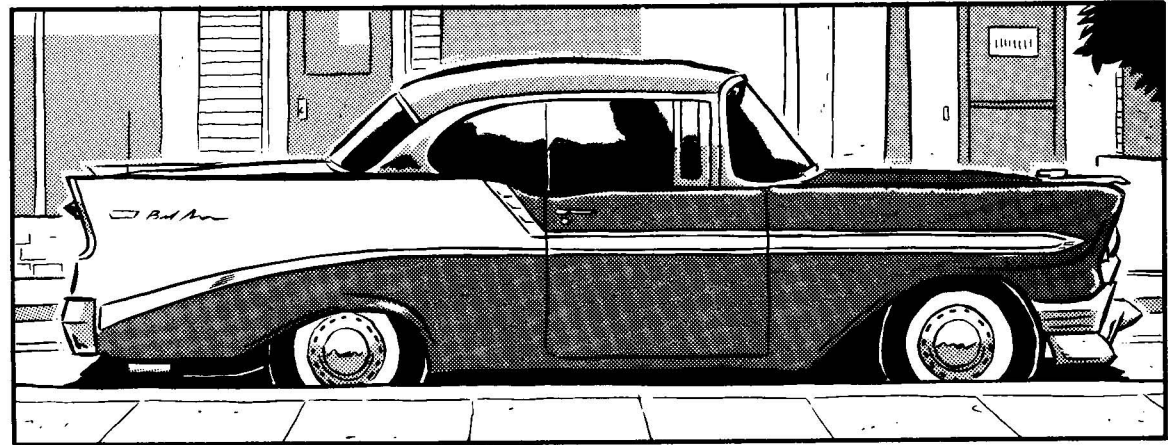


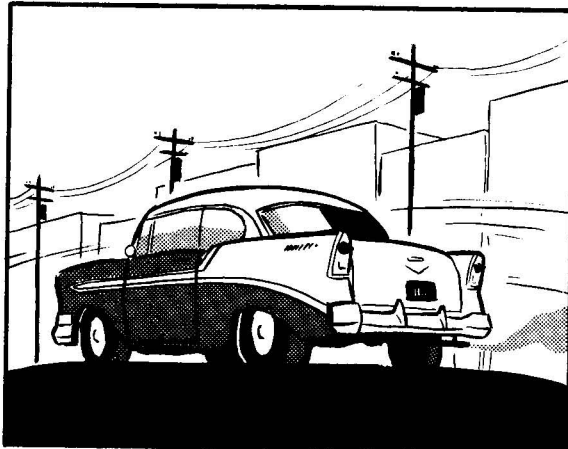
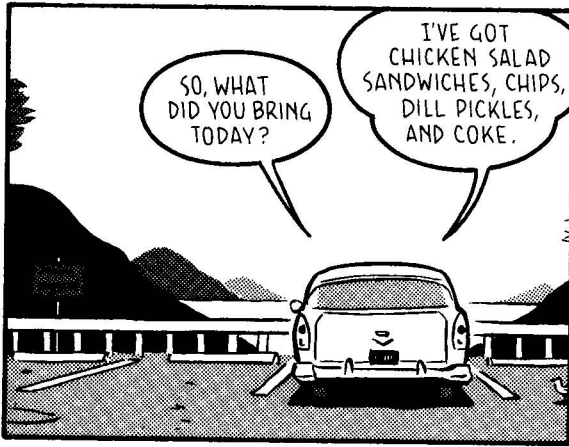
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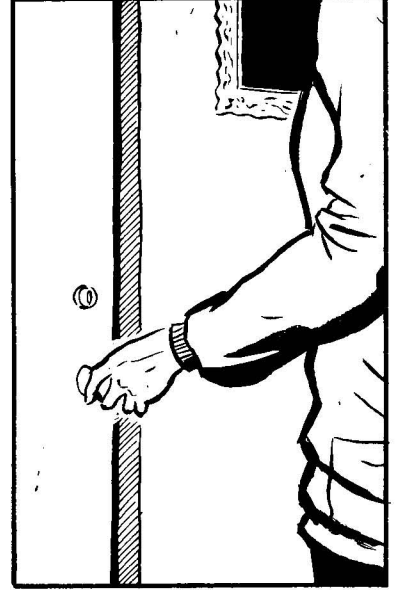
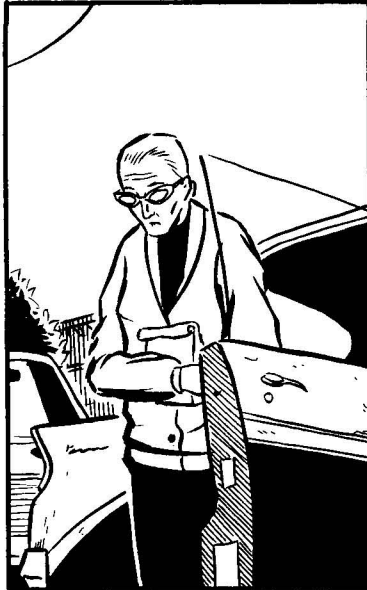
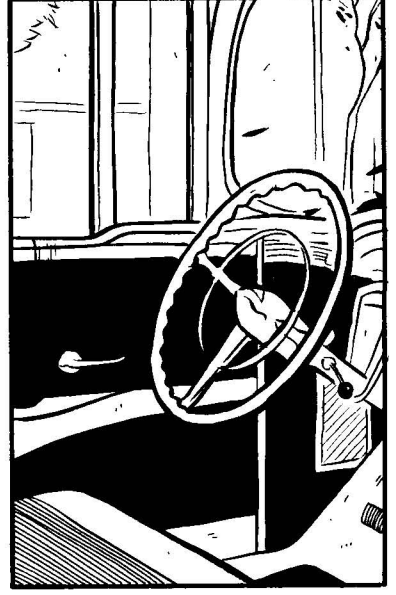
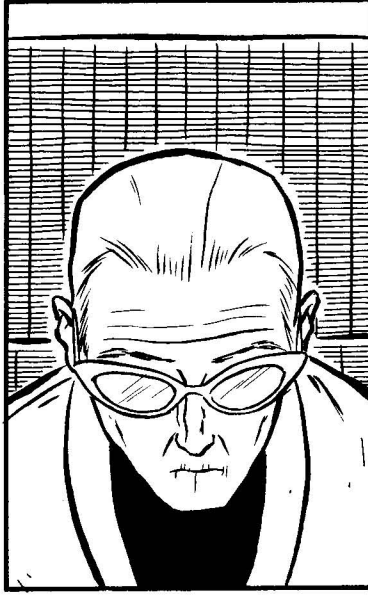
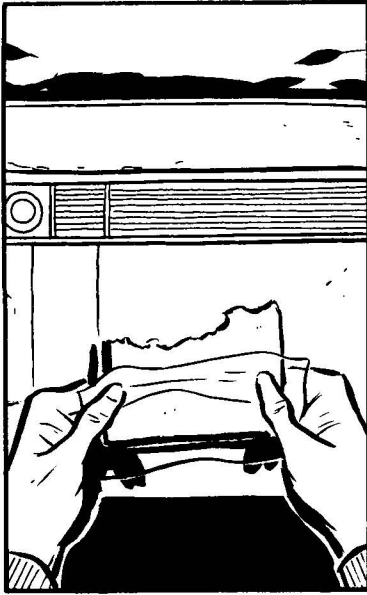
Lunch Break











THE
OXFORD BOOK OF
JAPANESE
SHORT STORIES

Edited by

Theodore W. Goossen



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PRIZE STOCK

Translated by John Nathan



My kid brother and I were digging with pieces of wood in the loose earth that smelled of fat and ashes at the surface of the crematorium, the makeshift crematorium in the valley that was simply a shallow pit in a clearing in the underbrush. The valley bottom was already wrapped in dusk and fog as cold as the spring water that welled up in the woods, but the side of the hill where we lived, the little village built around a cobblestone road, was bathed in grape light. I straightened out of a crouch and weakly yawned, my mouth stretching open. My brother stood up too, gave a small yawn, and smiled at me.

Giving up on 'collecting', we threw our sticks into the thick summer underbrush and climbed the narrow path shoulder to shoulder. We had come down to the crematorium in search of remains, nicely shaped bones we could use as medals to decorate our chests, but the village children had collected them all and we came away empty-handed. I would have to beat some out of one of my friends at elementary school. I remembered peeking two days earlier, past the waists of the adults darkly grouped around the pit, at the corpse of a village woman lying on her back with her naked belly swollen like a small hill, her expression full of sadness in the light of the flames. I was afraid. I grasped my brother's slender arm and quickened my step. The odor of the corpse, like the sticky fluid certain kinds of beetles leaked when we squeezed them in our calloused fingers, seemed to revive in my nostrils.

Our village had been forced to begin cremating out of doors by an extended rainy season: early summer rains had fallen stubbornly until floods had become an everyday occurrence. When a landslide crushed the suspension bridge that was the shortest route to the town, the elementary school annex in our village was closed, mail delivery stopped, and our adults, when a trip was unavoidable, reached the

town by walking the narrow, crumbly path along the mountain ridge. Transporting the dead to the crematorium in the *town* was out of the question.

But being cut off from the *town* caused our old but undeveloped homesteaders' village no very acute distress. Not only were we treated like dirty animals in the *town*, everything we required from day to day was packed into the small compounds clustered on the slope above the narrow valley. Besides, it was the beginning of summer, the children were happy school was closed.

Harelip was standing at the entrance to the village, where the cobblestone road began, cuddling a dog against his chest. With a hand on my brother's shoulder, I ran through the deep shade of the great gingko tree to peer at the dog in Harelip's arms.

'See!' Harelip shook the dog and made him snarl. 'Look at him!'

The arms Harelip thrust in front of me were covered with bites matted with dog hair and blood. Bites stood out like buds on his chest, too, and his short, thick neck.

'See!' Harelip said grandly.

'You promised to go after mountain dogs with me!' I said, my chest clogged with surprise and chagrin. 'You went alone!'

'I went looking for you,' Harelip said quickly. 'You weren't around...'

'You really got bit!' I said, just touching the dog with my fingertips. Its eyes were frenzied, like a wolf's, its nostrils flared. 'Did you crawl into the lair?'

'I wrapped a leather belt around my neck so he couldn't get my throat,' Harelip said proudly.

In the dusking, purple hillside and the cobblestone road I distinctly saw Harelip emerging from a lair of withered grass and shrubs with a leather belt around his throat and the puppy in his arms while a mountain dog bit into him.

'As long as they don't get your throat,' he said, confidence strong in his voice. 'And I waited until there were only puppies inside.'

'I saw them running across the valley,' my brother said excitedly, 'five of them.'

'When?'

'Just after noon.'

'I went after that.'

'He sure is white,' I said, keeping envy out of my voice.

'His mother *mated* with a wolf!' The dialect Harelip used was lewd but very real.

'You swear?' My brother spoke as if in a dream.

'He's used to me now,' Harelip said, accentuating his confidence. 'He won't go back to his friends.'

My brother and I were silent.

'Watch!' Harelip put the dog down on the cobblestones and released him. 'See!'

But instead of looking down at the dog we looked up at the sky covering the narrow valley. An unbelievably large airplane was crossing it at terrific speed. The roar churned the air into waves and briefly drowned us. Like insects trapped in oil we were unable to move in the sound.

'It's an enemy plane!' Harelip screamed. 'The enemy's here!'

Looking up at the sky we shouted ourselves hoarse. 'An enemy plane...'

But except for the clouds glowing darkly in the setting sun the sky was already empty. We turned back to Harelip's dog just as it was yowling down the gravel path away from us, its body dancing. Plunging into the underbrush alongside the path it quickly disappeared. Harelip stood there dumbfounded, his body poised for pursuit. My brother and I laughed until our blood seethed like liquor. Chagrined as he was, Harelip had to laugh, too.

We left him, and ran back to the storehouse crouching in the dusk like a giant beast. In the semi-darkness inside, my father was preparing our meal on the dirt floor.

'We saw a plane!' my brother shouted at my father's back. 'A great big enemy plane!'

My father grunted and did not turn around. Intending to clean it, I lifted his heavy hunting gun down from the rack on the wall and climbed the dark stairs, arm in arm with my brother.

'Too bad about that dog,' I said.

'And that plane,' my brother said.

We lived on the second floor of the co-operative storehouse in the middle of the village, in the small room once used for raising silkworms. When my father stretched out on his straw mats and blankets on the floor of thick planks that were beginning to rot and my brother and I lay down on the old door which was our sleeping platform, the former residence of countless silkworms that had left stains on the paper walls still reeking of their bodies and bits of

rotten mulberry leaf stuck to the naked beams in the ceiling filled to repletion with human beings.

We had no furniture at all. There was the dull gleam of my father's hunting gun, not only the barrel but even the stock, as if the oiled wood were also steel that would numb your hand if you slapped it, to provide our poor quarters with a certain direction, there were dried weasel pelts hanging in bunches from the exposed beams, there were various traps. My father made his living shooting rabbits, birds, wild boar in winter when the snow was deep, and trapping weasels and delivering the dried pelts to the town office.

As my brother and I polished the stock with an oil rag we gazed up through the chinks in the wooden slats at the dark sky outside. As if the roar of an airplane would descend from there again. But it was rare for a plane to cross the sky above the village. When I had put the gun back in the rack on the wall we lay down on the sleeping platform, huddling together, and waited, threatened by the emptiness in our stomachs, for my father to bring the pot of rice and vegetables, upstairs.

My brother and I were small seeds deeply embedded in thick flesh and tough, outer skin, green seeds soft and fresh and encased in membrane that would shiver and slough away at the first exposure to light. And outside the tough, outer skin, near the sea that was visible from the roof as a thin ribbon glittering in the distance, in the city beyond the heaped, rippling mountains, the war, majestic and awkward now like a legend that had survived down the ages, was belching foul air. But to us the war was nothing more than the absence of young men in our village and the announcements the mailman sometimes delivered of soldiers killed in action. The war did not penetrate the tough outer skin and the thick flesh. Even the 'enemy' planes that had begun recently to traverse the sky above the village were nothing more to us than a rare species of bird.

Near dawn I was awakened by the noise of a gigantic impact and a furious ringing in the ground. I saw my father sit up on his blanket on the floor like a beast lurking in the forest night about to spring upon his prey, his eyes bright with desire and his body tense. But instead of springing he dropped back to the floor and appeared to fall asleep again.

For a long time I waited with my ears peeled, but that ringing did not occur again. Breathing quietly the damp air that smelled of mold and small animals I waited patiently in the pale moonlight creeping

through the skylight high in the storehouse roof. A long time passed, and my brother, who had been asleep, his sweaty forehead pressed against my side, began to whimper. He too had been waiting for the ground to quiver and ring again, and the prolonged anticipation had been too much for him. Placing my hand on his delicate neck like a slender plant stem I shook him lightly to comfort him, and, lulled by the gentle movement of my own arm, fell asleep.

When I woke up, fecund morning light was slanting through every crack in the slat walls, and it was already hot. My father was gone. So was his gun from the wall. I shook my brother awake and went out to the cobblestone road without a shirt. The road and the stone steps were awash in the morning light. Children squinting and blinking in the glare were standing vacantly or picking fleas out of the dogs or running around and shouting, but there were no adults. My brother and I ran over to the blacksmith's shed in the shade of the lush nettle tree. In the darkness inside, the charcoal fire on the dirt floor spat no tongues of red flame, the bellows did not hiss, the blacksmith lifted no red-hot steel with his lean, sun-blackened arms. Morning and the blacksmith not in his shop—we had never known this to happen. Arm in arm, my brother and I walked back along the cobblestone road in silence. The village was empty of adults. The women were probably waiting at the back of their dark houses. Only the children were drowning in the flood of sunlight. My chest tightened with anxiety.

Harelip spotted us from where he was sprawled at the stone steps that descended to the village fountain and came running over, arms waving. He was working hard at being important, spraying fine white bubbles of sticky saliva from the split in his lip.

'Hey! Have you heard?' he shouted, slamming me on the shoulder.

'Have you?'

'Heard?' I said vaguely.

'That plane yesterday crashed in the hills last night. And they're looking for the enemy soldiers that were in it, the adults have all gone hunting in the hills with their guns!'

'Will they shoot the enemy soldiers?' my brother asked shrilly.

'They won't shoot, they don't have much ammunition,' Harelip explained obligingly, 'They aim to catch them!'

'What do you think happened to the plane?' I said.

'It got stuck in the fir trees and came apart,' Harelip said quickly, his eyes flashing. 'The mailman saw it, you know those trees.'

I did, fir blossoms like grass tassles would be in bloom in those woods now. And at the end of summer, fir cones shaped like wild bird's eggs would replace the tassles, and we would collect them to use as weapons. At dusk then and at dawn, with a sudden rude clatter, the dark brown bullets would be fired into the walls of the storehouse. . . .

'Do you know the woods I mean?'

'Sure I do. Want to go?'

Harelip smiled slyly, countless wrinkles forming around his eyes, and peered at me in silence. I was annoyed.

'If we're going to go I'll get a shirt,' I said, glaring at Harelip. 'And don't try leaving ahead of me because I'll catch up with you right away!'

Harelip's whole face became a smirk and his voice was fat with satisfaction.

'Nobody's going! Kids are forbidden to go into the hills. You'd be mistaken for the foreign soldiers and shot!'

I hung my head and stared at my bare feet on the cobblestones baking in the morning sun, at the sturdy, stubby toes. Disappointment seeped through me like treesap and made my skin flush hot as the innards of a freshly killed chicken.

'What do you think the enemy looks like?' my brother said.

I left Harelip and went back along the cobblestone road, my arm around my brother's shoulders. What *did* the enemy soldiers look like, in what positions were they lurking in the fields and the woods? I could feel foreign soldiers hiding in all the fields and woods that surrounded the valley, the sound of their hushed breathing about to explode into an uproar. Their sweaty skin and harsh body odor covered the valley like a season.

'I just hope they aren't dead,' my brother said dreamily. 'I just hope they catch them and bring them in.'

In the abundant sunlight we were hungry; saliva was sticky in our throats and our stomach muscles were tight. Probably it would be dusk before my father returned, we would have to find our own food. We went down behind the storehouse to the well with the broken bucket and drank, bracing ourselves with both hands against the chilly, sweating stones jutting from the inside wall like the swollen belly of a pupa. When we had drawn water for the shallow

iron pot and built a fire, we stuck our arms into the chaff heaped at the rear of the storehouse and stole some potatoes. As we washed them, the potatoes were hard as rocks in our hands.

The meal we began after our brief efforts was simple but plentiful. Eating away like a contented animal at the potato he grasped in both hands, my brother pondered a minute, then said, 'Do you think the soldiers are up in the fir trees? I saw a squirrel on a fir branch!'

'It would be easy to hide in the fir because they're in bloom,' I said.

'The squirrel hid right away, too,' my brother said, smiling.

I pictured fir trees covered with blossoms like grass tassles, and the foreign soldiers lurking in the highest branches and watching my father and the others through the bunched green needles. With fir blossoms stuck to their bulky flying suits, the soldiers would look like fat squirrels ready for hibernation.

'Even if they're hiding in the trees the dogs will find them and bark,' my brother said confidently.

When our stomachs were full we left the pot on the dirt floor with the remaining potatoes and a fistful of salt and sat down on the stone steps at the entrance to the storehouse. For a long time we sat there drowsily, and in the afternoon we went to bathe at the spring that fed the village fountain.

At the spring, Harelip, sprawled naked on the broadest, smoothest stone, was allowing the girls to fondle his rosy penis as if it were a small doll. Every so often, face beet-red, laughing shrilly in a voice like a screaming bird, he slapped one of the girls on her naked rear.

My brother sat down next to Harelip and raptly observed the merry ritual. I splashed water on the ugly children drowsily sunning themselves around the spring, put on my shirt without drying myself, returned to the stone steps at the storehouse entrance, leaving wet footprints on the cobblestones, and sat there without moving for a long time again, hugging my knees. Anticipation that was like madness, a heated, drunken feeling, was crackling up and down beneath my skin. Dreamily I pictured myself absorbed in the odd game to which Harelip seemed abnormally attached. But whenever the girls among the children returning naked from the spring smiled timidly at me, their hips swaying at each step they took and an unstable color like mashed peaches peeking from the folds of their meager, exposed vaginas, I rained pebbles and abuse on them and made them cringe.

I waited in the same position until a passionate sunset covered the valley, clouds the color of a forest fire wheeling in the sky, but still the adults did not return. I felt I would go mad with waiting.

The sunset had paled, a cool wind that felt good on newly burned skin had begun to blow up from the valley, and the first darkness of night had touched the shadows of things when the adults and the barking dogs finally returned to the hushed village, the village whose mind had been affected by uneasy anticipation. With the other children I ran out to greet them, and saw a large black man surrounded by adults. Fear struck me like a fist.

Surrounding the *catch* solemnly as they surrounded the wild boar they hunted in winter, their lips drawn tightly across their teeth, their backs bent forward almost sadly, the adults came walking in. The *catch*, instead of a flying suit of burnt-ocher silk and black leather flying shoes, wore a khaki jacket and pants and, on his feet, ugly, heavy-looking boots. His large, darkly glistening face was tilted up at the sky still streaked with light, and he limped as he dragged himself along. The iron chain of a boar trap was locked around both his ankles, rattling as he moved. We children fell in behind the adults, as silent as they were. The procession slowly advanced to the square in front of the school house and quietly halted. I pushed my way through the children to the front, but the old man who was our village headman loudly ordered us away; we retreated as far as the apricot trees in one corner of the square, halted there determinedly, and from beneath the trees kept watch through the thickening darkness over the adults' meeting. In the dirt floor houses that faced on the square the women hugging themselves beneath their white smocks strained irritably to catch the murmuring of the men who returned from a dangerous hunt with a *catch*. Harelip poked me sharply in the side from behind and pulled me away from the other children into the deep shadow of a camphor tree.

'He's black, you see that! I thought he would be all along.' Harelip's voice trembled with excitement. 'He's a real black man, you see!'

'What are they going to do with him, shoot him?'

'Shoot him!' Harelip shouted, gasping with surprise. 'Shoot a real live black man!'

'Because he's the enemy,' I asserted without confidence.

'Enemy! You call him an enemy!' Harelip seized my shirt and railed at me hoarsely, spraying my face with saliva through his lip.

'He's a black man, he's no enemy!'

'Look! Look at that!' It was my brother's awed voice, coming from the crowd of children. 'Look!'

Harelip and I turned around and peered at the black soldier; standing a little apart from the adults observing him in consternation, his shoulders sagging heavily, he was pissing. His body was beginning to melt into the thickened evening darkness, leaving behind the khaki jacket and pants that were somehow like overalls. His head to one side, the black soldier pissed on and on, and when a cloud of sighs from the children watching rose behind him he mournfully shook his hips.

The adults surrounded the black soldier again and slowly led him off; we followed a short distance behind. The silent procession surrounding the *catch* stopped in front of the loading entrance at the side of the storehouse. There the steps down to the cellar where the best of the autumn chestnuts were stored over the winter after the grubs beneath their hard skin had been killed with carbon disulfide yawned open blackly, like a hole inhabited by animals. Still surrounding the black soldier, the adults descended into the hole solemnly, as if a ceremony were beginning, and the white wavering of an adult arm closed the heavy trapdoor from inside.

Straining to catch a sound, we watched an orange light go on inside the long, narrow skylight window that ran between the floor of the storehouse and the ground. We could not find the courage to peek through the skylight. The short, anxious wait exhausted us. But no gunshot rang out. Instead, the village headman's shadowed face appeared beneath the partly opened trapdoor and we were yelled at and had to abandon even keeping watch at a distance from the skylight; the children, carrying with them expectations that would fill the night hours with bad dreams, ran off down the cobblestone road without a word of disappointment. Fear, awakened by their pounding feet, pursued them from behind.

Leaving Harelip lurking in the darkness of the apricot trees, still determined to observe the adults and the *catch*, my brother and I went around to the front of the storehouse and climbed, supporting ourselves against the railing that was always damp, to our room in the attic. We were to live in the same house as the *catch*, that was how it was to be! No matter how hard we listened in the attic, we would never be able to hear screaming in the cellar, but the luxurious, hazardous, entirely unbelievable fact was that we were sitting

on a sleeping platform above the cellar to which the black soldier had been taken. My teeth were chattering with fear and joy, and my brother huddling beneath the blanket was shaking as if he had caught a cold. As we waited for my father to come home dragging his fatigue and his heavy gun we smiled together at the wonderful good fortune that had befallen us.

Not so much to satisfy our hunger as to distract ourselves from the uproar in our chests with raising and lowering of arms and precise chewing, we were beginning to eat the cold, hardened, sweating potatoes that were left over when my father climbed the stairs. Shivering, my brother and I watched him place his hunting gun in the wooden rack on the wall and lower himself to the blanket spread on the dirt floor, but he said nothing, merely looked at the pot of potatoes we were eating. I could tell he was tired to death, and irritated. There was nothing we children could do about that.

'Is the rice gone?' he said, staring at me, the skin of his throat puffing like a sack beneath the stubble of beard.

'Yes. . . .' I said weakly.

'The barley too?' he grunted sourly.

'There's nothing!' I was angry.

'What about the airplane?' my brother said timidly. 'What happened to it?'

'It burned. Almost started a forest fire.'

My brother let out a sigh. 'The whole thing?'

'Just the tail was left.'

'The tail . . .' my brother murmured.

'Were there any others?' I asked. 'Was he flying alone?'

'Two other soldiers were dead. He came down in a parachute.'

'A parachute . . .' My brother was entirely lost in a dream. I summoned up my courage.

'What are you going to do with him?'

'Until we know what the town thinks, rear him.'

'Rear him? Like an animal?'

'He's the same as an animal,' my father said gravely. 'He stinks like an ox.'

'It would sure be nice to see him,' my brother said with an eye on my father, but my father went back down the stairs in grim silence.

We sat down on the wooden frame of our sleeping platform to

wait for my father to come back with borrowed rice and vegetables and cook us a pot of steaming gruel. We were too exhausted to be really hungry. And the skin all over our bodies was twitching and jumping like the genitals of a bitch in heat. We were going to rear the black soldier. I hugged myself with both arms, I wanted to throw off my clothes and shout—we were going to rear the black soldier, like an animal!

The next morning my father shook me awake without a word. Dawn was just breaking. Thick light and heavy fog were seeping through every crack in the wall boards. As I gulped my cold breakfast I gradually woke up. My father, his hunting gun on his shoulder and a lunch basket tied to his waist, watched me as I ate, waiting for me to finish, eyes dull yellow from lack of sleep. When I saw the bundle of weasel skins wrapped in a torn burlap bag at his knee I swallowed hard and thought to myself, so we are going down to the town! And surely we would report the black man to the authorities.

A whirlpool of words at the back of my throat was slowing the speed at which I could eat, but I saw my father's strong lower jaw covered in coarse beard moving incessantly as if he were chewing grain and I knew he was nervous and irritated from lack of sleep. Asking about the black soldier was impossible. The night before, after supper, my father had loaded his gun with new bullets and gone out to stand night watch.

My brother was sleeping with his head buried under a blanket that smelled of dank hay. When I was finished eating I moved around the room on tiptoes, careful not to wake him. Wrapping a green shirt of thick cloth around my bare shoulders, I stepped into the cloth sneakers I normally never used, shouldered the bundle that was between my father's knees, and ran down the stairs.

Low fog rolled along just above the wet cobblestones; the village, wrapped in haze, was fast asleep. The chickens were already tired and silent; the dogs did not even bark. I saw an adult with a gun leaning against the apricot tree alongside the storehouse, his head drooping. My father and the guard exchanged a few words in low voices. I stole a look at the cellar skylight yawning blackly open like a wound and I was gripped by terrific fear. The black soldier's arm reaches through the skylight and extends to seize me. I wanted to leave the village quickly. When we began walking in silence, careful

not to slip on the cobblestones, the sun penetrated the layers of fog and struck at us with tough, heated light.

To reach the village road along the ridge we climbed the narrow path of red earth into the fir forest, where once again we were at the bottom of dark night. Fog that filled my mouth with a metallic taste slanted down on us in droplets large as rain, making it hard for me to breathe and wetting my hair and forming white, shiny beads on the lint of my grimy, wrinkled shirt. The spring water that seeped up through the rotten leaves so soft beneath our feet to soak our cloth shoes and to freeze our toes was not so bad; we had to be truly careful not to wound our skin against the iron stalks of ferns or to surprise the adders watchfully coiled among their stubborn roots.

When we emerged from the fir forest onto the village road, where it was brightening and the fog was burning off, I brushed the fog out of my shirt and short pants as carefully as if I were removing sticky tickseeds. The sky was clear and violently blue. The distant mountains the color of the copper ore we found in the dangerous abandoned mine in our valley was a sparkling, deep-blue sea rushing at us. And a single, whitish handful of the real sea.

All around us wild birds were singing. The upper branches of the high pines were humming in the wind. Crushed beneath my father's boot, a fieldmouse leaped from the piled leaves like a spurting gray fountain, frightening me for an instant, and ran in a frenzy into the brilliant underbrush alongside the road.

'Are we going to tell about the black man when we get to town?' I asked my father's broad back.

'Umm?' my father said. 'Yes. . . .'

'Will the constable come out from town?'

'There's no telling,' my father grunted. 'Until the report gets to the prefectural office there's no telling what will happen.'

'Couldn't we just go on rearing him in the village? Is he dangerous? You think he is?'

My father rejected me with silence. I felt my surprise and fear of the night before, when the black soldier was led back to the village, reviving in my body. What was he doing in that cellar? The black soldier leaves the cellar, slaughters the people and the hunting dogs in the village and sets fire to the houses. I was so afraid I was trembling, I didn't want to think about it. I passed my father and ran, panting, down the long slope.

By the time we were on level road again the sun was high. The

red earth exposed by small landslides on both sides of the road was raw as blood and glistening in the sun. We walked along with our foreheads bared to the fierce light. Sweat bubbled from the skin on my head, soaked through my cropped hair and ran from my forehead down my cheeks.

When we entered the *town* I pressed my shoulder against my father's high hip and marched straight past the provocations of the children in the street. If my father hadn't been there the children would have jeered at me and thrown stones. I hated the children of the *town* as I would have hated a species of beetle with a shape I could never feel comfortable with, and I disdained them. Skinny children in the noonday light flooding the town, with treacherous eyes. If only adult eyes had not been watching me from the rear of dark shops I was confident I could have knocked any one of them down.

The town office was closed for lunch. We worked the pump in the square in front of the office and drank some water, then sat down on wooden chairs beneath a window with hot sun pouring through it and waited a long time. An old official finally finished his lunch and appeared, and when he and my father had spoken together in low voices and stepped into the mayor's office I carried the weasel pelts over to the small scales lined up behind a reception window. There the skins were counted and entered in an account book with my father's name. I watched carefully as a nearsighted lady official with thick glasses wrote down the number of skins.

When this job was finished I had no idea what to do. My father was taking forever. So I went looking, my bare feet squishing down the hall like suction cups, one shoe in each hand, for my only acquaintance in the *town*, a man who frequently carried notices out to our village. We all called this one-legged man 'Clerk', but he did other things as well, such as assisting the doctor when we had our physicals at the school annex in the village.

'Well if it isn't Frog!' Rising from the chair behind his desk, Clerk shouted, making me just a little angry, but I went over anyway. Since we called him 'Clerk', we couldn't very well complain about his calling us, the village children, 'Frog'. I was happy to have found him.

'So you caught yourselves a black man!' Clerk said, rattling his false leg under the desk.

'Yes. . . .' I said, resting my hands on his desk where his lunch was wrapped in yellowed newspaper.

'That's really something!'

I wanted to nod grandly at his bloodless lips, like an adult, and talk about the black soldier, but words to explain the huge negro who had been led through the dusk to the village like captured prey I simply couldn't find.

'Will they shoot him?' I asked.

'I don't know.' Clerk gestured with his chin at the mayor's office. 'They're probably deciding now.'

'Will they bring him to town?' I said.

'You look mighty happy the schoolroom is closed,' Clerk said, evading my important question. 'The schoolmistress is too lazy to make the trip out there, all she does is complain. She says the village children are dirty and smelly.'

I felt ashamed of the dirt creasing my neck, but I shook my head defiantly and made myself laugh. Clerk's artificial leg jutting from beneath his desk was twisted awkwardly. I liked to watch him hopping along the mountain road with his good right leg and the artificial leg and jut one crutch, but here the artificial leg was weird and treacherous, like the children of the *town*.

'But what do you care, as long as school is out you have no complaints, right, Frog!' Clerk laughed, his artificial leg rattling again. 'You and your pals are better off playing outside than being treated like dirt in a schoolroom!'

'They're just as dirty,' I said.

It was true, the women teachers were ugly and dirty, all of them; Clerk laughed. My father had come out of the mayor's office and was calling me quietly. Clerk patted me on the shoulder and I patted him on the arm and ran out.

'Don't let the prisoner escape, Frog!' he shouted at my back.

'What did they decide to do with him?' I said to my father as we returned through the sunwashed *town*.

'You think they're going to take any responsibility!' My father spat out the words as if he were scolding me, and said nothing more. Intimidated by my father's foul humor I walked along in silence, in and out of the shade of the *town's* shriveled, ugly trees. Even the trees in the *town*, like the children in the streets, were treacherous and unfamiliar.

When we came to the bridge at the edge of the *town* we sat down

on the low railing and my father unwrapped our lunch in silence. Struggling to keep myself from asking questions, I extended a slightly dirty hand toward the package on his lap. Still in silence we ate our rice balls.

As we were finishing, a young girl with a neck as refreshing as a bird's came walking across the bridge. I swiftly considered my own clothes and features and decided I was finer and tougher than any child in the *town*. I stuck both feet out in front of me, my shoes on, and waited for the girl to pass. Hot blood was singing in my ears. For a brief instant the girl peered at me scowlingly, then she ran off. Suddenly my appetite was gone. I climbed down the narrow stairs at the approach to the bridge and walked to the river for a drink of water. Tall wormwood bushes clustered thickly along the bank. I kicked and tore my way through them to the river's edge, but the water was a stagnant, dirty brown. It struck me I was a miserable and meager creature.

By the time we had left the road along the ridge, cleared the fir forest, and emerged at the entrance to the village, calves stiffened and faces caked with dust and oil and sweat, evening had covered the valley entirely; in our bodies the heat of the sun lingered and the heavy fog was a relief. I left my father on his way to the village headman's house to make his report and climbed to the second floor of the storehouse. My brother was sitting on the sleeping platform, fast asleep. I reached out and shook him, feeling the fragile bones in his naked shoulder against my palm. My brother's skin contracted slightly beneath my hot hand, and from his eyes that suddenly opened fatigue and fear faded.

'How was he?' I said.

'He just slept in the cellar.'

'Were you scared all by yourself?' I said gently.

My brother shook his head, his eyes serious. I opened the wooden shutters just a little and climbed onto the window sill to piss. The fog engulfed me like a living thing and swiftly stole into my nostrils. My urine jumped a great distance, spattering against the cobblestones, and when it struck the bay window that jutted from the first floor it rebounded and warmly wet the tops of my feet and my goosepimpled thighs. My brother, his head pressed against my side like a baby animal, observed intently.

We remained in that position for a while. Small yawns rose from

our narrow throats, and with each yawn we cried just a few transparent, meaningless tears.

'Did Harelip get to see him?' I said to my brother as he helped me close the wooden shutters, the slender muscles in his shoulders knotting.

'Kids get yelled at if they go to the square,' he said with chagrin. 'Are they coming from town to take him?'

'I don't know,' I said.

Downstairs, my father and the lady from the general store came in talking in loud voices. The lady from the general store was insisting that she couldn't carry the food for the black soldier down to the cellar. That's no job for a woman, your son should be a help! I finished removing my shoes and straightened up. My brother's soft palm was pressed against my hip. Biting my lip, I waited for my father's voice.

'Come down here!' When I heard my father shout I threw my shoes under the sleeping platform and ran down the stairs.

With the butt of his hunting gun my father pointed to the basket of food the woman had left on the dirt floor. I nodded, and lifted the basket carefully. In silence we left the storehouse and walked through the chill fog. The cobblestones underfoot retained the warmth of day. At the side of the storehouse no adult was standing guard. I saw the pale light leaking through the narrow cellar window and felt fatigue break out all over my body. Yet my teeth were chattering with excitement at this first opportunity to see the black man close up.

The imposing padlock on the cellar door was dripping wet; my father unlocked it and peered inside, then carefully, his gun ready, went down alone. I squatted at the entrance, waiting, and air wet with fog fastened to the back of my neck. In front of the countless eyes hovering behind and peering at me I was ashamed of the trembling in my brown, sturdy legs.

'C'mon,' said my father's muffled voice.

Holding the foodbasket against my chest, I went down the short steps. The *catch* was crouching in the dim light of a naked bulb. The thick chain of a boar-trap connecting his black leg and a pillar drew and locked my gaze.

Arms clasped around his knees and his chin resting even further down on his long legs, the *catch* looked up at me with bloodshot eyes, sticky eyes that wrapped themselves around me. All the blood

in my body rushed toward my ears, heating my face. I turned away and looked up at my father, who was leaning against the wall with his gun pointed at the black soldier. My father motioned at me with his chin. With my eyes almost closed I stepped forward and placed the basket of food in front of the black soldier. As I stepped back, my insides shuddered with sudden fear and I had to fight my nausea down. At the basket of food the black soldier stared, my father stared, I stared. A dog barked in the distance. Beyond the narrow skylight window the dark square was hushed.

Suddenly the food basket began to interest me, I was seeing the food through the black soldier's starved eyes. Several large rice balls, dried fish with the fat broiled away, stewed vegetables, goat's milk in a cut-glass bottle. Without unfolding from his crouch, still hugging his knees, the black soldier continued to stare at the food basket for a long time until finally I began to feel hunger pangs myself. It occurred to me the black soldier might disdain the meager supper we provided, and disdain us, and refuse to touch the food. Shame assaulted me. If the black soldier showed no intention of eating, my shame would infect my father, adult's shame would drive my father to desperation and violence, the whole village would be torn apart by adults pale with shame. What a terrible idea it had been to feed the black soldier!

But all of a sudden he extended an unbelievably long arm, lifted the wide-mouthed bottle in thick fingers covered with bristly hair, drew it to himself, and smelled it. Then the bottle was tipped, the black soldier's thick, rubbery lips opened, large white teeth neatly aligned like parts inside a machine were exposed, and I saw milk flowing back into a vast, pink, glistening mouth. The black soldier's throat made a noise like water and air entering a drain, from the corners of his swollen lips like overripe fruit that had been bound with string the thick milk spilled, ran down his bare neck, soaked his open shirt and chest, and coagulated like fat on his tough, darkly, gleaming skin, trembling there. I discovered, my own lips drying with excitement, that goat's milk was a beautiful liquid.

With a harsh clanking the black soldier returned the glass bottle to the basket. Now his original hesitation was gone. The rice balls looked like small cakes as he rolled them in his giant hands; the dried fish, head bones and all, was crushed between his gleaming teeth. Standing alongside my father with my back against the wall, buffeted by admiration, I observed the black soldier's powerful chewing.

Since he was engrossed in his meal and paid no attention to us, I had the opportunity, even as I fought the pangs in my own empty stomach, to observe the adults' *catch* in suffocating detail. And what a wonderful *catch* he was!

The black soldier's short, curly hair tightened into small cowlicks here and there on his well-shaped skull, and just above his ears, which were pointed like a wolf's, turned a smoldering gray. The skin from his throat to his chest was lit from inside with a somber, purple light; every time he turned his head and supple creases appeared in his thick, oily neck, I felt my heart leap. And there was the odor of his body, pervading with the persistence of nausea rising into the throat, permeating all things like a corrosive poison, an odor that flushed my cheeks and flashed before my eyes like madness. . . . As I watched the black soldier feeding ravenously, my eyes hot and watery as though infected, the crude food in the basket was transformed into a fragrant, rich, exotic feast. If even a morsel had remained when I lifted the basket I would have seized it with fingers that trembled with secret pleasure and wolfed it down. But the black soldier finished every bit of food and then wiped the dish of vegetables clean with his fingers.

My father poked me in the side and, trembling with shame and outrage, as if I had been aroused from a lewd daydream, I walked over to the black soldier and lifted the basket. Protected by the muzzle of my father's gun I turned my back to the black soldier and was starting up the steps when I heard his low, rich cough. I stumbled, and felt fear goosepimple the skin all over my body.

At the top of the stairs to the second floor of the storehouse a dark, distorting mirror swayed in the hollow of a pillar; as I climbed the stairs a totally insignificant Japanese boy with twitching cheeks and pale, bloodless lips on which he chewed rose gradually out of the dimness. My arms hung limply and I felt almost ready to cry. I fought a beaten, tearful feeling as I opened the rain shutters that someone had closed at some point in the day.

My brother, eyes flashing, was sitting on the sleeping platform. His eyes were hot, and a little dry with fear.

'You closed the rain shutters, didn't you!' I said, sneering to hide the trembling of my own lips.

'Yes—' Ashamed of his timidity my brother lowered his eyes. 'How was he?'

'He smells terrible,' I said, sinking in fatigue. Truly I was ex-

hausted, and I felt wretched. The trip to the *town*, the black soldier's supper—after the long day's work my body was as heavy as a sponge soaked with fatigue. Taking off my shirt, which was covered with dried leaves and burrs, I bent over to wipe my dirty feet with a rag, a demonstration for my brother's sake that I had no desire to accept further questions. My brother observed me worriedly, his lips pursed. I crawled in next to him and burrowed under our blanket with its smell of sweat and small animals. My brother sat there watching me, his knees together and pressing against my shoulder, not asking any more questions. It was just as he sat when I was sick with fever, and I too, just as when I was sick with fever, longed only to sleep.

When I woke up late the next morning I heard the noise of a crowd coming from the square alongside the storehouse. My brother and father were gone. I looked up at the wall and saw that the hunting gun was not there. As I listened to the clamor and stared at the empty gun rack my heart began to pound. I sprang out of bed, grabbed my shirt, and ran down the stairs.

Adults were crowded into the square, and the dirty faces of the children looking up at them were tight with uneasiness. Apart from everyone, Harelip and my brother were squatting next to the cellar window. They've been watching! I thought to myself angrily, and was running toward them when I saw Clerk emerge, head lowered, lightly supporting himself on his crutch, from the cellar entrance. Violent, dark exhaustion and landsliding disappointment buried me. But what followed Clerk was not the dead body of the black soldier but my father, his gun on his shoulder and the barrel still in its bag, talking quietly with the village headman. I breathed a sigh, and sweat hot as boiling water steamed down my sides and the insides of my thighs.

'Take a look!' Harelip shouted at me as I stood there. 'Go on!'

I got down on all fours on the hot cobblestones and peered in through the narrow skylight window that was just at ground level. At the bottom of the lake of darkness the black soldier lay slumped on the floor like a domestic animal that had been pummeled senseless.

'Did they beat him?' I said to Harelip, my body trembling with anger as I straightened. 'Did they beat him when he had his feet tied and couldn't move?' I shouted.

'What?' In order to repel my anger Harelip had readied himself for a fight, his face taut, his lip thrust out.

'Who?'

'The adults!' I shouted. 'Did they beat him?'

'They didn't have to beat him,' Harelip said regretfully. 'All they did was go in and look, just looking at him did that!'

Anger faded. I shook my head vaguely. My brother was peering at me.

'It's all right,' I said to my brother.

One of the village children stepped around us and tried to look through the skylight window but Harelip kicked him in the side and he screamed. Harelip had already reserved the right to decide who should look at the black soldier through the skylight. And he was keeping a nervous watch on those who would usurp his right.

I walked over to where Clerk was talking to the adults surrounding him. As if I were a village brat with snot drying on my upper lip he ignored me completely and went right on talking, damaging my self-respect and my feeling of friendship for him. But there are times when you cannot afford to nurse your own pride and self-respect. I thrust my head past the hips of the adults and listened to Clerk and the headman talking.

Clerk was saying that neither the *town* office nor the police station was able to take charge of the black prisoner. Until a report had been made to the prefectural office and a reply received, the village must keep the black soldier, was obliged to keep him. The headman objected, repeating that the village lacked the force to hold the black soldier prisoner. Moreover, delivering the dangerous prisoner under guard by the long mountain route was too much for the villagers to handle unaided. The long rainy season and the floods had made everything complicated, difficult.

But when Clerk assumed a peremptory tone, the arrogant tone of a minor bureaucrat, the adults submitted weakly. When it became clear that the village would keep the black soldier until the prefecture had settled on a policy, I left the perplexed, disgruntled adults and ran back to my brother and Harelip where they sat in front of the skylight, monopolizing it. I was filled with deep relief, anticipation, and anxiety I had contracted from the adults and which moved in me like sluggish worms.

'I told you they weren't going to kill him!' Harelip shouted triumphantly. 'How can a black man be an enemy!'

'It'd be a waste,' said my brother happily. The three of us peered through the skylight, cheeks bumping, and seeing the black soldier stretched out as before, his chest lifting and falling as he breathed, we sighed with satisfaction. There were some children who advanced right to the soles of our feet upturned on the ground and drying under the sun, muttering their displeasure with us, but when Harelip sprang up and shouted they scattered, screaming.

Presently we tired of watching the black soldier lying there, but we did not abandon our privileged position. Harelip allowed the children one by one, when they had promised compensation in dates, apricots, figs, persimmons or whatever, to look through the skylight for a short time. As the children stared through the window even the backs of their necks reddened with their surprise and wonder, and when they stood up they rubbed the dirt from their jaws with their palms. Leaning against the storehouse wall I looked down at the children engrossed in this first real experience of their lives while Harelip yelled at them to hurry and their small butts burned in the sun, and I felt a strange satisfaction and fullness, exhilaration. Harelip turned over on his knees a hunting dog that wandered over from the crowd of adults and began pulling ticks and crushing them between his amber nails as he shouted orders and arrogant abuse at the children. Even after the adults had left with Clerk to see him as far as the ridge road we continued our strange game. From time to time we took long looks ourselves, the children's resentful voices at our backs, but the black soldier lay sprawled there as before and gave no indication of moving. As if he had been beaten and kicked, as if merely looking at him had been enough to wound him!

That night, accompanied once again by my father with his gun, I went down into the cellar carrying a heavy pot of gruel. The black soldier looked up at us with eyes yellowed heavily along the edges with fat, then thrust his hairy fingers directly into the hot pot and ate hungrily. I was able to observe him calmly, and my father, who had stopped pointing his gun, leaned against the wall looking bored.

As I looked down at the black man with his forehead aslant above the pot, watching the trembling of his thick neck and the sudden flexing and relaxing of his muscles, I began to perceive him as a gentle animal, an obedient animal. I looked up at Harelip and my brother peering through the skylight with bated breath and flashed a sly smile at their gleaming eyes. I was growing used to the black

soldier—the thought planted a seed of proud happiness that sprouted in me. But when the black soldier moved in such a way that the chain on the boar-trap rattled, fear revived in me with tremendous vigor, rushing into even the most distant blood vessels in my body and making my skin crawl.

From that day on, the job of carrying food to the black soldier, once in the morning and once at night, accompanied by my father, who no longer bothered to remove his rifle from his shoulder, was a special privilege reserved for me. When my father and I appeared at the side of the storehouse early in the morning or as evening was becoming night, the children who had been waiting in the square would release all at once a large sigh that rose spreading, like a cloud, into the sky. Like a specialist who has lost all interest in his work but retains his meticulousness on the job, I crossed the square with brows intently knit, never glancing at the children. My brother and Harelip were satisfied to walk on either side of me, so close our bodies touched, as far as the entrance to the cellar. And when my father and I went down the steps they ran back and peered through the skylight. Even if I had become entirely bored with carrying food to the black soldier, I would have continued the job simply for the pleasure of feeling at my back as I walked along that hot sigh of envy risen to resentment in all the children, Harelip included.

I did ask my father, however, for special permission for Harelip to come to the cellar once a day only, in the afternoon. This was to transfer to Harelip's shoulders part of a burden that was too heavy for me to handle alone. A small, old barrel had been placed next to one of the pillars in the cellar for the black soldier's use. In the afternoon, lifting the barrel between us by the thick, heavy rope that ran through it, Harelip and I carefully climbed the steps and walked to the communal compost heap to empty the stinking, sloshing mixture of the black soldier's shit and piss. Harelip went about his work with excessive zeal: sometimes, before we emptied the barrel into the large tank alongside the compost heap, he would stir the contents with a stick and discourse on the state of the black soldier's digestion, particularly his diarrhea, concluding, among other things, that the trouble was caused by the kernels of corn in his gruel.

When Harelip and I went down to the cellar with my father to get the small barrel and found the black soldier astride it, his pants down around his ankles and his black, shiny rear thrust out in almost

exactly the attitude of a copulating dog, we had to wait behind him for a while. Harelip, listening to the furtive clinking of the chain that linked the black soldier's ankles on either side of the barrel, eyes glazed dreamily with surprise and awe, kept a tight grip on my arm.

The children came to be occupied entirely with the black soldier, he filled every smallest corner of our lives. Among the children the black soldier spread like a plague. But the adults had their work. The adults did not catch the children's plague. They could not afford to wait motionlessly for the instructions that were so slow to arrive from the town office. When even my father, who had undertaken supervision of the prisoner, began leaving the village to hunt again, the black soldier began to exist in the cellar for the sole purpose of filling the children's daily lives.

My brother and Harelip and I fell into the habit of spending the daylight hours in the cellar where the black soldier sat, our chests hammering with the excitement of breaking a rule at first but soon enough, as we grew accustomed to being there, with complete casualness, as if supervising the black soldier during the day, while the adults were away in the hills or down in the valley, was a duty we had been entrusted with and must not neglect. The peephole at the skylight, abandoned by Harelip and my brother, was passed on to the village children. Flat on their bellies on the hot, dusty ground, their throats flushed and dry with envy, the children took turns peering in at the three of us sitting around the black soldier on the dirt floor. When occasionally, in an excess of envy, a child forgot himself and tried to follow us into the cellar, he received a pommeling from Harelip for his rebellious act and had to fall to the ground with a bloody nose.

In no time at all we had only to carry the black soldier's 'barrel' to the top of the cellar steps, transporting it to the compost heap in the fierce sun while under attack by its ferocious stench was a task carried out by children we haughtily appointed. The designated children, cheeks shining with pleasure, carried the barrel straight up, careful not to spill a drop of the muddy yellow liquid that seemed so precious to them. And every morning all the children, including ourselves, glanced up at the narrow road that descended through the woods from the ridge with almost a prayer that Clerk would not appear with instructions we dreaded.

The chain from the boar-trap cut into the black man's ankles, the

cuts became inflamed, blood trickled onto his feet and shriveled and stuck there like dried blades of grass. We worried constantly about the pinkish infection in the wounds. When he straddled the barrel the pain was so bad it made the black soldier bare his teeth like a laughing child. After looking deep into one another's eyes for a long time and talking together, we resolved to remove the boar-trap. The black soldier, like a dull black beast, his eyes always wet with a thick liquid that might have been tears or mucous, sat in silence hugging his knees on the cellar floor—what harm could he do us when we removed the trap? He was only a single head of black man!

When Harelip tightly grasped the key I brought from my father's tool bag, leaned over so far his shoulder was touching the black soldier's knees, and unlocked the trap, the black soldier suddenly rose with a groan and stamped his feet. Weeping with fear, Harelip threw the trap against the wall and ran up the steps; my brother and I, not even able to stand up, huddled together. The fear of the black soldier that had suddenly revived in us took our breaths away. But instead of dropping upon us like an eagle, the black soldier sat back down just where he was and hugged his knees and gazed with his wet, filmy eyes at the trap lying against the wall. When Harelip returned, head hanging with shame, my brother and I greeted him with kind smiles. The black soldier was as gentle as a domestic animal. . . .

Late that night my father came to lock the giant padlock on the cellar door and saw that the black soldier's ankles had been freed, yet he did not admonish me. Gentle as cattle—the thought, like air itself, had crept into the lungs of everyone in the village, children and adults alike.

The next morning my brother and Harelip and I took breakfast to the black soldier and found him puttering with the boar trap. When Harelip had thrown the trap against the wall the mechanism that snapped it shut had broken. The black soldier was examining the broken part with the same expert assurance as the trap-mender who came to the village every spring. And then abruptly he lifted his darkly glistening forehead and indicated with motions what he wanted. I looked at Harelip, unable to contain the joy that seemed to slacken my cheeks. The black soldier had communicated with us, just as our livestock communicated so had the black soldier!

We ran to the village headman's house, shouldered the tool box

that was part of common village property, and carried it back to the cellar. It contained things that could have been used as weapons but we did not hesitate to entrust it to the black soldier. We could not believe that this black man like a domestic animal once had been a soldier fighting in the war, the fact rejected the imagination. The black soldier looked at the tool box, then gazed into our eyes. We watched him with joy that made us flush and shiver.

'He's like a person!' Harelip said to me softly, and as I poked my brother in the rear I was so proud and pleased I felt my body twist with laughter. Sighs of wonder from the children billowed through the skylight like fog.

We took the breakfast basket back, and when we finished our own breakfast and returned to the cellar the black soldier had taken a wrench and a small hammer from the tool box and had placed them neatly on a burlap bag on the floor. We sat next to him and he looked at us, then his large, yellowed teeth were bared and his cheeks slackened and we were jolted by the discovery that he could also smile. We understood then that we had been joined to him by a sudden, deep, passionate bond that was almost 'human'.

Afternoon lengthened, the lady from the blacksmith's dragged Harelip off with angry shouts and our butts began to ache from sitting directly on the dirt floor, but still the black soldier worked on the trap, his fingers soiled with old, dusty grease, the spring making a soft metallic click as he cocked and tried it again and again.

Not bored, I watched his pink palm indent where the teeth of the trap pressed into it and watched the oily grime twist into strands on his thick, sweaty neck. These things produced in me a not unpleasant nausea, a faint repulsion connected to desire. Puffing out his cheeks as if he were softly singing inside his broad mouth, the black soldier worked on intently. My brother, leaning on my knees, observed his fingers moving with eyes that shone with admiration. Flies swarmed around us, and their buzzing entangled the heat and echoed with it deep inside my ears.

When the trap bit into the braided rope with a noticeably sharper, sturdier snap, the black soldier placed it carefully on the floor and smiled at me and my brother through the dull, heavy liquid in his eyes. Beads of sweat trembled on the dark polish of his forehead. For truly a long time we peered, still smiling, just as we did with the goats and the hunting dogs, into the black soldier's gentle eyes. It was hot. We immersed ourselves in the heat, as if it were a shared

pleasure connecting us and the black soldier, and continued smiling back and forth. . . .

One morning Clerk was carried in covered in mud and bleeding from his chin. He had stumbled in the woods and fallen from a low cliff, and he had been found, unable to move, by a man from the village on his way to work in the hills. As he received treatment at the village headman's house Clerk stared in dismay at his artificial leg, which had bent where the thick, stiff leather was secured with a metal band and could not be properly reattached. He made no effort to communicate instructions from the *town*. The adults grew irritated; we wished Clerk had lain at the foot of the cliff undiscovered and had starved to death, assuming he had come to take the black soldier away. But he had come to explain that instructions from the prefecture still had not arrived. We regained our happiness, our energy, our sympathy for Clerk. And we took his artificial leg, and the toolbox, to the cellar.

Lying on the sweating cellar floor, the black soldier was singing in a soft, thick voice, a song that gripped us with its raw power, a song concealing regret and screams that threatened to overwhelm us. We showed him the damaged artificial leg. He stood up, peered at the leg for a minute, then swiftly fell to work. Cries of delight burst from the children peeping through the skylight, and the three of us, Harelip and my brother and I, also laughed at the top of our lungs.

When Clerk came to the cellar at dusk the artificial leg was completely restored. He fitted it onto his stump of a thigh and stood up, and we again raised a shout of happiness. Clerk bounded up the stairs and went into the square to try the fit of the leg. We pulled the black soldier to his feet by both arms and, without the slightest hesitation, as if it were an established habit already, took him into the square with us.

The black soldier filled his broad nostrils with the young, buoyant, summer-evening air, his first air above ground since he had been taken prisoner, and observed Clerk closely as he tried his leg. All went well. Clerk came running over, took from his pocket a cigarette made of knotweed leaves, a lopsided cigarette that smelled something like a brush fire and smarted fiercely if the smoke got in your eyes, lit it, and handed it to the tall black soldier. The black soldier inhaled it and doubled over coughing violently and clutching his throat. Clerk, embarrassed, smiled a doleful smile, but we chil-

dren laughed out loud. The black soldier straightened, wiped his tears with a giant palm, took from the pocket of the linen pants hugging his powerful hips a dark, shiny pipe and held it out to Clerk.

Clerk accepted the gift, the black soldier nodded his satisfaction, and the evening sun flooded them in grape light. We shouted until our throats began to hurt and milled around them, laughing as though touched by madness.

We began taking the black soldier out of the cellar frequently, for walks along the cobblestone road. The adults said nothing. When they encountered the black soldier surrounded by us children they merely looked away and circled around him, just as they stepped into the grass to avoid the bull from the headman's house when it came along the road.

Even when the children were all being kept busy working at home and could not visit the black soldier in his underground quarters, no one, adults or children, was surprised to see him napping in the shade of a tree in the square or walking slowly back and forth along the road. Like the hunting dogs and the children and the trees, the black soldier was becoming a component of village life.

On days when at dawn my father returned carrying at his side a long, narrow trap made of hammered wooden slats and a fat weasel with an unbelievably long body thrashing around inside it, my brother and I had to spend the whole morning on the dirt floor of the storehouse, helping with the skinning. On those days we hoped from the bottom of our hearts that the black soldier would come to watch us work. When he did appear we would kneel on either side of my father as he grasped the bloodstained skinning knife with bits of fat stuck to the handle, and, scarcely breathing, would wish the rebellious, nimble weasel a complete and proper death and a deft skinning, for our guest's sake. A last instant of revenge in its final throes, as the weasel's neck was wrung it farted a horrible, terrific smell, and when the skin was laid back with a soft tearing noise at the dully gleaming tip of my father's knife there remained only muscle with a pearly luster encasing a small body so exposed it was lewd. My brother and I, careful not to let the guts spill out, carried the body to the communal compost heap to throw it away, and when we returned, wiping our soiled fingers on broad leaves, the weasel skin was already turned inside out and being

nailed to a plank, fat membranes and thin capillaries glistening in the sun. The black soldier, producing what sounded like birdcalls through his pursed lips, was peering at the folds of the skin being cleaned of fat between my father's thick fingers so it would dry more easily. And when the fur had dried as stiff as claws on the plank and was criss-crossed with stains the color of blood like railroad lines across a map and the black soldier saw and admired it, how proud we were of my father's 'technique.' There were times when even my father, as he blew water on the fur, turned to the black soldier with friendly eyes. At such times my brother and the black soldier and my father and I were united, as if in a single family, around my father's weasel-curing technique.

The black soldier also liked to watch the blacksmith at work. From time to time, especially when Harelip was helping forge something like a hoe, his half-naked body glowing in the fire, we would surround the black soldier and walk over to the blacksmith's shed. When the blacksmith lifted with hands covered in charcoal dust a piece of red-hot steel and plunged it into water, the black soldier would raise a cry of admiration like a scream, and the children would point and laugh. The blacksmith, flattered, frequently repeated this dangerous demonstration of his skill.

Even the women stopped being afraid of the black soldier. At times he received food directly from their hands.

It was the height of summer, and still no instructions arrived from the prefectural office. There was a rumor that the prefectural capitol had been bombed, but that had no effect on our village. Air hotter than the flames that burned a city hung over our village all the day long. And the space around the black soldier began to fill up with an odor that made our heads swim when we sat with him in the airless cellar, a strong, fatty odor like the stink of the weasel meat rotting on the compost heap. We joked about it constantly and laughed until our tears flowed, but when the black soldier began to sweat he stank so badly we could not bear to be at his side.

One hot afternoon Harelip proposed that we take him to the village spring; appalled at ourselves for not having had the thought earlier, we climbed the cellar steps tugging at the black soldier's grimy hands. The children gathered in the square surrounded us with whoops of excitement as we ran down the cobblestone road baking in the sun.

When we were as naked as birds and had stripped the black soldier's clothes we plunged into the spring all together, splashing one another and shouting. We were enraptured with our new idea. The naked black soldier was so large that the water barely reached his hips even when he went to the deepest part of the spring; when we splashed him he would raise a scream like a chicken whose neck was being wrung and plunge his head underwater and remain submerged until he shot up shouting and spouting water from his mouth. Wet and reflecting the strong sunlight, his nakedness shone like the body of a black horse, full and beautiful. We clamored around him splashing and shouting, and by and by the girls left the shade of the oak trees where they had been hesitating and came racing into the spring and hurriedly submerged their own small nakedness. Harelip caught one of the girls and began his lewd ritual, and we brought the black soldier over and from the best position showed him Harelip receiving his pleasure. The sun flooded all of our hard bodies, the water seethed and sparkled. Harelip, bright red and laughing, raised a shout each time he slapped the girl's spray-wet, shining buttocks with his open palm. We roared with laughter, and the girl cried.

Suddenly we discovered that the black soldier possessed a magnificent, heroic, unbelievably beautiful penis. We crowded around him bumping naked hips, pointing and teasing, and the black soldier gripped his penis and planted his feet apart fiercely like a goat about to copulate and bellowed. We laughed until we cried and splashed the black soldier's penis. Then Harelip dashed off naked as he was, and when he returned leading a large nanny-goat from the courtyard at the general store we applauded his idea. The black soldier opened his pink mouth and shouted, then danced out of the water and bore down upon the frightened, bleating goat. We laughed as though mad, Harelip strained to keep the goat's head down, and the black soldier labored mightily, his black, rugged penis glistening in the sun, but it simply would not work the way it did with a billy-goat.

We laughed until we could no longer support ourselves on our legs, so hard that when finally we fell exhausted to the ground, sadness stole into our soft heads. To us the black soldier was a rare and wonderful domestic animal, an animal of genius. How can I describe how much we loved him, or the blazing sun above our wet, heavy skin that distant, splendid summer afternoon, the deep shadows on the cobblestones, the smell of the children and the black

soldier, the voices hoarse with happiness, how can I convey the repletion and rhythm of it all?

To us it seemed that the summer that bared those tough, resplendent muscles, the summer that suddenly and unexpectedly geysered like an oil well, spewing happiness and drenching us in black, heavy oil, would continue forever and never end.

Later in the day of our archaic bathing in the spring an evening downpour rudely locked the valley in fog, and the rain continued to fall late into the night. The next morning, Harelip and my brother and I kept close to the storehouse wall with the black soldier's food, to avoid the rain that was still falling. After breakfast, the black soldier, hugging his knees, softly sang a song in the dark cellar. Cooling our outstretched fingers in the rainspray sifting through the skylight, we were washed away by the expanse of the black soldier's voice and the sealike solemnity of his song. When the song was finished there was no more spray coming through the skylight. Taking the black soldier's arm, we led him smiling into the square. The fog had swiftly cleared from the valley; the trees had absorbed so much rainwater that their foliage was plump and swollen as baby chicks. When the wind blew, the trees trembled in fits, scattering wet leaves and drops of rainwater and causing small, momentary rainbows from which cicadas darted. In the heat beginning to revive and the tempest of shrill cicadas we sat down on the flat stone at the cellar entrance and for a long time breathed the air that smelled of wet bark.

Scarcely moving, we sat there until, in the afternoon, Clerk, carrying his rain gear, descended the road from the woods and went into the headman's house. We stood up then, leaned against an old, dripping apricot tree, and waited for Clerk to burst from the darkness of the house to wave a signal. But Clerk did not appear; instead, the alarm bell on the roof of the headman's barn began to clang, summoning the adults out working in the valley and the woods, and women and children from the rain-wet houses appeared on the cobblestone road. I looked back at the black soldier and saw that the smile was gone from his face. Anxiety suddenly born in me tightened my chest. Leaving the black soldier behind, my brother and Harelip and I ran to the headman's house.

Clerk was standing in silence on the dirt floor in the entranceway; inside, the village headman sat crosslegged on the wooden floor, lost

in thought. As we waited impatiently for the adults to gather, we struggled to maintain an expectation that was beginning to feel somehow hopeless. From the fields in the valley and from the woods, dressed in their work clothes, their cheeks puffy with discontent, the adults, including my father, who stepped into the entranceway with several small birds lashed to the barrel of his gun, gradually returned.

The minute the meeting began Clerk floored the children with an explanation in dialect to the effect that the authorities had decided the black soldier was to be turned over to the prefecture. Originally the army was to have come for him, Clerk continued, but as a result of an apparent misunderstanding and general confusion within the army itself, the village had been ordered to escort the black soldier as far as the *town*. The adults would have to suffer only the minor inconvenience of bringing the black soldier in. But we were submerged in astonishment and disappointment; turn over the black soldier and what would remain in the village? Summer would become an empty husk, a shed skin!

I had to warn the black soldier. Slipping past the adults I ran back to where he was sitting in the square in front of the storehouse. Slowly lifting his dull eyeballs he looked up at me halted in front of him and gasping for breath. I was able to convey nothing to him. I could only stare at him while sadness and irritation shook me. Still hugging his knees, the black soldier was trying to peer into my eyes. His lips as full as the belly of a pregnant river fish slowly opened and shiny white saliva submerged his gums. Looking back, I saw the adults leave the dark entranceway of the headman's house with Clerk in the lead and move toward the storehouse.

I shook the black soldier's shoulder as he sat there, and shouted at him in dialect. I was so agitated I felt I would swoon. What could I do, he merely allowed himself to be shaken by my arm in silence and peered around him, craning his thick neck. I released his shoulder and hung my head.

Suddenly the black soldier rose, soaring in front of me like a tree, and seized my upper arm and pulled me tight up against himself and raced down the cellar steps. In the cellar, dumbfounded, I was transfixed for a brief moment by the flexing of the black soldier's taut thighs and the contraction of his buttocks as he moved around swiftly. Lowering the trap door, he secured it by passing the chain on the boar-trap he had repaired through the ring on the door and

fastening it around the metal support protruding from the wall. Then he came back down the steps, his hands clasped and his head drooping, and I looked at his fatty, bloodshot eyes that appeared to have been packed with mud, his expressionless eyes, and realized abruptly that he was once again, as when the adults had taken him prisoner, a black beast that rejected understanding, a dangerously poisonous substance. I looked up at the giant black soldier, looked at the chain wrapped around the trap door, looked down at my own small, bare feet. A wave of fear and amazement broke over my vital organs and eddied around them. Darting away from the black soldier I pressed my back against the wall. The black soldier stood where he was in the middle of the cellar, his head drooping. I bit my lip and tried to withstand the trembling in my legs.

The adults gathered above the trap door and began to tug at it, gently at first and then abruptly with a great cackling as of chickens being pursued. But the thick oak door that had been so useful for locking the black soldier securely in the cellar was locking the adults out now, and the children, the trees, the valley.

A few adults peered frantically through the skylight and were immediately replaced by others, bumping foreheads in the scramble. There was a sudden change in their behavior. At first they shouted. Then they fell silent, and a threatening gun barrel was inserted through the skylight. Like an agile beast the black soldier leaped at me and hugged me tightly to himself, using me as a shield against the rifle, and as I moaned in pain and writhed in his arms I comprehended the cruel truth. I was a prisoner, and a hostage. The black soldier had transformed into the *enemy*, and my side was clamoring beyond the trap door. Anger, and humiliation, and the irritating sadness of betrayal raced through my body like flames, scorching me. And most of all, fear, swelling and eddying in me, clogging my throat and making me sob. In the black soldier's rude arms, aflame with anger, I wept tears. The black soldier had taken me prisoner. . . .

The gun barrel was withdrawn, the clamor increased, and then a long discussion began on the other side of the skylight. Without releasing his numbing grip on my arm the black soldier went into a corner where there was no danger of a sniper's bullet and sat down in silence. He pulled me in close to himself, and, just as I had often done when we had been friends, I kneeled with my bare knees within the circle of his body odor. The adults continued to talk for a long time. Now and then my father peered in through the skylight

and nodded to his son who had been taken hostage, and each time, I cried. Dusk rose like a tide, first in the cellar and then in the square beyond the skylight. When it got dark the adults began going home several at a time, shouting a few words of encouragement to me as they left. For a long time after that I heard my father walking back and forth beyond the skylight, and then suddenly he was gone and there was no further indication of life aboveground. Night filled the cellar.

The black soldier released my arm and peered at me as though pained by the thought of the warm, everyday familiarity that had flowed between us until that morning. Trembling with anger, I looked away and remained with my eyes on the floor, my shoulders stubbornly arched, until the black soldier turned his back on me and cradled his head between his knees. I was alone; like a weasel caught in a trap I was abandoned, helpless, sunk in despair. In the darkness the black soldier did not move.

Standing, I went over to the steps and touched the boar-trap, but it was cold and hard and repelled my fingers and the bud of a shapeless hope. I did not know what to do. I could not believe the trap that had captured me; I was a baby field rabbit who weakens and dies as it stares in disbelief at the metal claws biting into its wounded foot. The fact that I had trusted the black soldier as a friend, my incredible foolishness, was an agony to me. But how could I have doubted that black, stinking giant who never did anything but smile! Even now I could not believe that the man whose teeth were chattering in the darkness in front of me was that dumb black man with the large penis.

I was trembling with chill, and my teeth chattered. My stomach had begun to hurt. I squatted, pressing my stomach, and I encountered sudden dismay: I was going to have diarrhea, the strained nerves throughout my body had brought it on. But I could not relieve myself in front of the black soldier. I clenched my teeth and endured, cold sweat beading my forehead. I endured my distress for such a long time that the effort to endure filled the space that had been occupied by fear.

But finally I resigned myself, walked over to the barrel we had laughed and hooted to see the black soldier straddle, and dropped my pants. My exposed, white buttocks felt weak and defenseless, it seemed to me I could feel humiliation dyeing my throat, my esophagus, even the walls of my stomach pitch black. When I was finished

I stood up and returned to the corner. I was beaten and I submitted, sinking to the bottom of despair. Pressing my grimy forehead against the cellar wall, warm with the heat of the ground above, I cried for a long time, stifling my sobs as best I could. The night was long. In the woods mountain dogs in a pack were barking. The air grew chill. Fatigue possessed me heavily and I slumped to the floor and slept.

When I woke up, my arm was again in the numbing grip of the black soldier's hand. Fog and adult voices were blowing in through the skylight. I could also hear the creaking of Clerk's artificial leg as he paced back and forth. Before long the thud of a heavy mallet hammering the trapdoor merged with the other noises. The heavy blows resounded in my empty stomach and made my chest ache.

Suddenly the black soldier was shouting, and then he seized me by the shoulder and pulled me to my feet and dragged me into the middle of the cellar into full view of the adults on the other side of the skylight. I could not understand why he did this. The eyes at the skylight peered in at my shame that dangled there by its ears like a shot rabbit. Had my brother's moist eyes been among them I would have bitten off my tongue in shame. But only adult eyes were clustered at the window, peering in at me.

The noise and tempo of the mallet heightened, and the black soldier screamed and grasped my throat from behind in his large hand. His nails bit into the soft skin and the pressure on my Adam's apple made it impossible to breathe. I flailed with my hands and feet and threw back my head and moaned. How bitter it was to be humiliated in front of the adults! I twisted my body, trying to escape the body of the black soldier glued to my back, and kicked his shins, but his thick, hairy arms were hard and heavy. And his shrill screams rose above my moans. The adults' faces withdrew, and I imagined the black soldier had intimidated them into racing to put a stop to the smashing of the trapdoor. The black soldier stopped screaming and the pressure like a boulder against my throat eased. My love for the adults and my feeling of closeness revived.

But the pounding on the trapdoor grew louder. The adults' faces reappeared at the skylight, and the black soldier, screaming, tightened his fingers around my throat. My head was pulled back and my opened lips uttered a shrill, feeble sound I could do nothing about,

like the scream of a small animal. Even the adults had abandoned me. Unmoved by the sight of the black soldier choking me to death they continued to batter the door. When they had broken in they would find me with my neck wrung like a weasel's, my hands and feet stiffened. Burning with hatred, despairing, I writhed and wept and listened to the sound of the mallet, my head wrenched back, moaning without shame.

The sound of countless wheels revolving rang in my ears and blood from my nose ran down my cheeks. Then the trapdoor splintered, muddy bare feet with bristly hair covering even the backs of the toes piled in, and ugly adults inflamed to madness filled the cellar. Screaming, the black soldier clasped me to himself and sank slowly down the wall toward the floor. My back and buttocks tight against his sweating, sticky body, I felt a current hot as rage flowing between us. And like a cat that has been surprised in the act of copulation, in spite of my shame, I laid my hostility bare. It was hostility toward the adults crowded together at the bottom of the steps observing my humiliation, hostility toward the black soldier squeezing my throat in this thick hand, pressing his nails into the soft skin and making it bleed, hostility toward all things mixing together as it twisted upward in me. The black soldier was howling. The noise numbed my eardrums, there in the cellar at the height of summer I was slipping into an absence of all sensation replete as if with pleasure. The black soldier's ragged breathing covered the back of my neck.

From the midst of the bunched adults my father stepped forward dangling a hatchet from his hand. I saw that his eyes were blazing with rage and feverish as a dog's. The black soldier's nails bit into my neck and I moaned. My father bore down on us, and seeing the hatchet being raised I closed my eyes. The black soldier seized my left wrist and lifted it to protect his head. The entire cellar erupted in a scream and I heard the smashing of my left hand and the black soldier's skull. On the oily, shining skin of his arm beneath my jaw thick blood coagulated in shivering drops. The adults surged toward us and I felt the black soldier's arm slacken and pain sear my body.

Inside a sticky black bag my hot eyelids, my burning throat, my searing hand began to knit me and give me shape. But I could not pierce the sticky membrane and break free of the bag. Like a lamb

prematurely born I was wrapped in a bag that stuck to my fingers. I could not move my body. It was night, and near me the adults were talking. Then it was morning, and I felt light against my eyelids. From time to time a heavy hand pressed my forehead and I moaned and tried to shake it off but my head would not move.

The first time I succeeded in opening my eyes it was morning again. I was lying on my own sleeping platform in the storehouse. In front of the rain shutters Harelip and my brother were watching me. I opened my eyes all the way, and moved my lips. Harelip and my brother raced down the stairs shouting, and my father and the lady from the general store came up. My stomach was crying for food, but when my father's hand placed a pitcher of goat's milk to my lips nausea shook me and I clamped my mouth shut, yelling, and dribbled the milk on my throat and chest. All adults were unbearable to me, including my father. Adults who bore down on me with teeth bared, brandishing a hatchet, they were uncanny, beyond my understanding, provoking nausea. I continued to yell until my father and the others left the room.

A while later my brother's arm quietly touched my body. In silence, my eyes closed, I listened to his soft voice telling me how he and the others had helped gather firewood for cremating the black soldier, how Clerk had brought an order forbidding the cremation, how the adults, in order to retard the process of decay, had carried the black soldier's corpse into the abandoned mine in the valley and were building a fence to keep mountain dogs away.

In an awed voice my brother told me repeatedly that he had thought I was dead. For two days I had lain here and eaten nothing and so he had thought I was dead. With my brother's hand on me I entered sleep that lured me as irresistibly as death.

I woke up in the afternoon and saw for the first time that my smashed hand was wrapped in cloth. For a long time I lay as I was, not moving, and looking at the arm on my chest, so swollen I could not believe it was mine. There was no one in the room. An unpleasant odor crept through the window. I understood what the odor meant but felt no sadness.

The room had darkened and the air turned chill when I sat up on the sleeping platform. After a long hesitation I tied the ends of the bandage together and put it over my head as a sling, then leaned against the open window and looked down upon the *village*. The odor fountaining furiously from the black soldier's heavy corpse

blanketed the cobblestone road and the buildings and the valley supporting them, an inaudible scream from the corpse that encircled us and expanded limitlessly overhead as in a nightmare. It was dusking. The sky, a teary gray with a touch of orange enfolded in it, hovered just above the valley, narrowing it.

Every so often adults would hurry down toward the valley in silence, chests thrown out. Every time they appeared I sensed them making me feel nauseous and afraid and withdrew inside the window. It was as if while I had been in bed the adults had been transformed into entirely inhuman monsters. And my body was as dull and heavy as if it had been packed with wet sand.

Trembling with chill, I bit into my parched lips and watched the cobblestones in the road, in pale golden shadow to begin with, fluidly expand, then turn breathtaking grape, contours continuing to swell until finally they submerged, disappearing, in a weak, purple, opaque light. Now and then salty tears wet my cracked lips and made them sting.

From time to time children's shouts reached me from the back of the storehouse through the odor of the black soldier's corpse. Taking each trembling step with caution, as after a long illness, I went down the dark stairs and walked along the deserted cobblestone road toward the shouting.

The children were gathered on the overgrown slope that descended to the small river at the valley bottom, their dogs racing around them and barking. In the thick underbrush along the river below, the adults were still constructing a sturdy fence to keep wild dogs away from the abandoned mine. The sound of stakes being driven echoed up from the valley. The adults worked in silence, the children ran madly in circles on the slope, shrieking gaily.

I leaned against the trunk of an old paulownia tree and watched the children playing. They were sliding down the grassy slope, using the tail of the black soldier's fallen plane as a sled. Straddling the sharp-edged, wonderfully buoyant sled they went skimming down the slope like young beasts. When the sled seemed in danger of hitting one of the black rocks that jutted from the grass here and there, the rider kicked the ground with his bare feet and changed the sled's direction. By the time one of the children dragged the sled back up the hill, the grass that had been crushed beneath it on the way down was slowly straightening, obscuring the bold voyager's wake. The children and the sled were that light. The children

sledged down screaming, the dogs pursued them barking, the children dragged the sled up again. An irrepressible spirit of movement like the fiery dust that precedes a sorcerer crackled and darted among them.

Harelip left the group of children and ran up the slope toward me. Leaning against the trunk of an evergreen oak that resembled a deer leg, a tufted stem of grass between his teeth, he peered into my face. I looked away, pretending to be absorbed in the sledding. Harelip peered closely at my arm in the sling and snorted.

'It smells,' he said. 'Your smashed hand stinks.'

Harelip's eyes were lusting for battle and his feet were planted apart in readiness for my attack; I glared back at him but did not leap at his throat.

'That's not me,' I said in a feeble, hoarse voice, 'That's the nigger's smell.'

Harelip stood there appalled, observing me. I turned away, biting my lip, and looked down at the simmering of the short, fine grass burying his bare ankles. Harelip shrugged his shoulders with undisguised contempt and spat forcefully, then ran shouting back to his friends with the sled.

I was no longer a child—the thought filled me like a revelation. Bloody fights with Harelip, hunting small birds by moonlight, sledding, wild puppies, these things were for children. And that variety of connection to the world had nothing to do with me.

Exhausted and shaking with chill I sat down on the ground that retained the midday warmth. When I lowered myself the lush summer grass hid the silent work of the adults at the valley bottom, but the children playing with the sled suddenly loomed in front of me like darkly silhouetted woodland gods. And amidst these young Pans wheeling in circles with their dogs like victims fleeing before a flood, the night air gradually deepened in color, gathered itself, and became pure.

'Hey Frog, feeling better?'

A dry, hot hand pressed my head from behind but I did not turn or try to stand. Without turning away from the children playing on the slope I glanced with eyes only at Clerk's black artificial limb planted firmly alongside my own bare legs. Even Clerk, simply by standing at my side, made my throat go dry.

'Aren't you going to take a turn, Frog? I thought it must have been your idea!'

I was stubbornly silent. When Clerk sat down with a rattling of his leg he took from his jacket pocket the pipe the black soldier had presented him and filled it with his tobacco. A strong smell that nettled the soft membranes in my nose and ignited animal sentiments, the aroma of a brush fire, enclosed me and Clerk in the same pale blue haze.

'When a war starts smashing kids' fingers it's going too far,' Clerk said.

I breathed deeply, and was silent. The war, a long, bloody battle on a huge scale, must still have been going on. The war that like a flood washing away flocks of sheep and trimmed lawns in some distant country was never in the world supposed to have reached our village. But it had come, to mash my fingers and hand to a pulp, my father swinging a hatchet, his body drunk on the blood of war. And suddenly our village was enveloped in the war, and in the tumult I could not breathe.

'But it can't go on much longer,' Clerk said gravely, as if he were talking to an adult. 'The army is in such a state you can't get a message through, nobody knows what to do.'

The sound of hammers continued. Now the odor of the black soldier's body had settled over the entire valley like the luxuriant lower branches of a giant, invisible tree.

'They're still hard at work,' Clerk said, listening to the thudding of the hammers. 'Your father and the others don't know what to do either, so they're taking their sweet time with those stakes!'

In silence we listened to the heavy thudding that reached us in intervals in the children's shouting and laughter. Presently Clerk began with practiced fingers to detach his artificial leg. I watched him.

'Hey!' he shouted to the children. 'Bring that sled over here.'

Laughing and shouting, the children dragged the sled up. When Clerk hopped over on one leg and pushed through the children surrounding the sled I picked up his leg and ran down the slope. It was heavy; managing it with one hand was difficult and irritating.

The dew beginning to form in the lush grass wet my bare legs and dry leaves stuck to them and itched. At the bottom of the slope I stood waiting, holding the artificial leg. It was already night. Only the children's voices at the top of the slope shook the thickening membrane of dark, nearly opaque air.

A burst of louder shouts and laughter and a soft skimming through

the grass, but no sled cleaved the sticky air to appear before me. I thought I heard the dull thud of an impact and stood as I was, peering into the dark air. After a long silence I finally saw the airplane tail sliding toward me down the slope, riderless, spinning as it came. I threw the artificial leg into the grass and ran up the dark slope. Alongside a rock jutting blackly from the grass and wet with dew, both hands limply open, Clerk lay on his back grinning. I leaned over and saw that thick, dark blood was running from the nose and ears of his grinning face. The noise the children made as they came running down the slope rose above the wind blowing up from the valley.

To avoid being surrounded by the children I abandoned Clerk's corpse and stood up on the slope. I had rapidly become familiar with sudden death and the expressions of the dead, sad at times and grinning at times, just as the adults were familiar with them. Clerk would be cremated with the firewood gathered to cremate the black soldier. Glancing up with tears in my eyes at the narrowed sky still white with twilight, I went down the grassy slope to look for my brother.

A VERY STRANGE, ENCHANTED BOY

Translated by Geraldine Harcourt



There's a song in English that begins: 'There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy.' I have an idea it was Nat King Cole who sang it, though I'm not sure. I heard it once on the radio, catching the beginning because the English was unusually clear; I remember being so startled by the words, and by the slow-flowing melody in a minor key, that I felt a chill. I listened intently, wistful and also afraid, as if something impossible had happened. It was a beautiful tune.

There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy. . . .

It was a sound that shouldn't have been humanly possible to convey, that should have gone on echoing in a closed space, yet there it was as an actual song.

Although I only heard it that one time, I still can't forget the beginning.

Now that I come to think of it, there was a book as well: The Mysterious Stranger. Its Japanese title, like the song's, was Strange Boy. I was so shaken when I came across it in a bookstore, you'd have thought I'd seen the ghost of one of my family. There on the spine, printed much too boldly, were words that shouldn't have been out in the open. While strongly drawn to them, I hurried away in spite of myself.

Yes, there was a book like that, too.

'I've found infinity.'

Michie was surprised by another announcement from her six-year-old.

'Infinity?' she asked. The boy nodded. 'Where?'

'Come here and I'll show you.'

He ran to the bathroom. When she saw where he was headed, she understood.

'Ah, the mirrors.'

'Come on, quick.'

'I already know.'

ALTERNATE EDITION

STUDIES
IN THE
SHORT
STORY

EDITED BY
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A Distant Episode

The September sunsets were at their reddest the week the Professor decided to visit Aïn Tadouirt, which is in the warm country. He came down out of the high, flat region in the evening by bus, with two small overnight bags full of maps, sun lotions and medicines. Ten years ago he had been in the village for three days; long enough, however, to establish a fairly firm friendship with a café-keeper, who had written him several times during the first year after his visit, if never since. "Hassan Ramani," the Professor said over and over, as the bus bumped downward through ever warmer layers of air. Now facing the flaming sky in the west, and now facing the sharp mountains, the car followed the dusty trail down the canyons into air which began to smell of other things besides the endless ozone of the heights: orange blossoms, pepper, sun-baked excrement, burning olive oil, rotten fruit. He closed his eyes happily and lived for an instant in a purely olfactory world. The distant past returned—what part of it, he could not decide.

The chauffeur, whose seat the Professor shared, spoke to him without taking his eyes from the road. "*Vous êtes géologue?*"

A geologist? Ah, no! I'm a linguist."

"There are no languages here. Only dialects."

"Exactly. I'm making a survey of variations on Moghrebi."

The chauffeur was scornful. "Keep on going south," he said. "You'll find some language you never heard of before."

As they drove through the town gate, the usual swarm of urchins rose up out of the dust and ran screaming beside the bus. The Professor folded his dark glasses, put them in his pocket; and as soon as the vehicle had come to a standstill he jumped out, pushing his way through the indignant boys who clutched at his luggage in vain, and walked quickly into the Grand Hotel Saharien. Out of its eight rooms there were two

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available—one facing the market and the other, a smaller and cheaper one, giving onto a tiny yard full of refuse and barrels, where two gazelles wandered about. He took the smaller room, and pouring the entire pitcher of water into the tin basin, began to wash the grit from his face and ears. The afterglow was nearly gone from the sky, and the pinkness in objects was disappearing, almost as he watched. He lit the carbide lamp and winced at its odor.

After dinner the Professor walked slowly through the streets to Hassan Ramani's café, whose back room hung hazardously out above the river. The entrance was very low, and he had to bend down slightly to get in. A man was tending the fire. There was one guest sipping tea. The *qaouaji* tried to make him take a seat at the other table in the front room, but the Professor walked airily ahead into the back room and sat down. The moon was shining through the reed latticework and there was not a sound outside but the occasional distant bark of a dog. He changed tables so he could see the river. It was dry, but there was a pool here and there that reflected the bright night sky. The *qaouaji* came in and wiped off the table.

"Does this café still belong to Hassan Ramani?" he asked him in the Moghrebi he had taken four years to learn.

The man replied in bad French: "He is deceased."

"Deceased?" repeated the Professor, without noticing the absurdity of the word. "Really? When?"

"I don't know," said the *qaouaji*. "One tea?"

"Yes. But I don't understand . . ."

The man was already out of the room, fanning the fire. The Professor sat still, feeling lonely, and arguing with himself that to do so was ridiculous. Soon the *qaouaji* returned with the tea. He paid him and gave him an enormous tip, for which he received a grave bow.

"Tell me," he said, as the other started away. "Can one still get those little boxes made from camel udders?"

The man looked angry. "Sometimes the Reguibat bring in those things. We do not buy them here." Then insolently, in Arabic: "And why a camel-udder box?"

"Because I like them," retorted the Professor. And then because he was feeling a little exalted, he added, "I like them so much I want to make a collection of them; and I will pay you ten francs for every one you can get me."

"*Khamstache*," said the *qaouaji*, opening his left hand rapidly three times in succession.

"Never. Ten."

"Not possible. But wait until later and come with me. You can give me what you like. And you will get camel-udder boxes if there are any."

He went out into the front room, leaving the Professor to drink his tea and listen to the growing chorus of dogs that barked and howled as the moon rose higher into the sky. A group of customers came into the front room and sat talking for an hour or so. When they had left, the *qaouaji* put out the fire and stood in the doorway putting on his burnous. "Come," he said.

Outside in the street there was very little movement. The booths were all closed and the only light came from the moon. An occasional pedestrian passed, and grunted a brief greeting to the *qaouaji*.

"Everyone knows you," said the Professor, to cut the silence between them.

"Yes."

"I wish everyone knew me," said the Professor, before he realized how infantile such a remark must sound.

"No one knows you," said his companion gruffly.

They had come to the other side of the town, on the promontory above the desert, and through a great rift in the wall the Professor saw the white endlessness, broken in the foreground by dark spots of oasis. They walked through the opening and followed a winding road between rocks, downward toward the nearest small forest of palms. The Professor thought: "He may cut my throat. But his café—he would surely be found out."

"Is it far?" he asked, casually.

"Are you tired?" countered the *qaouaji*.

"They are expecting me back at the Hotel Saharien," he lied.

"You can't be there and here," said the *qaouaji*.

The Professor laughed. He wondered if it sounded uneasy to the other.

"Have you owned Ramani's café long?"

"I work there for a friend." The reply made the Professor more unhappy than he had imagined it would.

"Oh. Will you work tomorrow?"

"That is impossible to say."

The Professor stumbled on a stone, and fell, scraping his hand. The *qaouaji* said: "Be careful."

The sweet black odor of rotten meat hung in the air suddenly.

"Agh!" said the Professor, choking. "What is it?"

The *qaouaji* had covered his face with his burnous and did not answer. Soon the stench had been left behind. They were on flat ground. Ahead the path was bordered on each side by a high mud wall. There was no breeze and the palms were quite still, but behind the walls was the sound of running water. Also, the odor of human excrement was almost constant as they walked between the walls.

The Professor waited until he thought it seemed logical for him to ask with a certain degree of annoyance: "But where are we going?"

"Soon," said the guide, pausing to gather some stones in the ditch.

"Pick up some stones," he advised. "Here are bad dogs."

"Where?" asked the Professor, but he stooped and got three large ones with pointed edges.

They continued very quietly. The walls came to an end and the bright desert lay ahead. Nearby was a ruined marabout, with its tiny dome only half standing, and the front wall entirely destroyed. Behind it were clumps of stunted, useless palms. A dog came running crazily toward them on three legs. Not until it got quite close did the Professor hear its steady low growl. The *qaouaji* let fly a large stone at it, striking it square in the muzzle. There was a strange snapping of jaws and the dog ran sideways in another direction, falling blindly against rocks and scrambling haphazardly about like an injured insect.

Turning off the road, they walked across the earth strewn with sharp stones, past the little ruin, through the trees, until they came to a place where the ground dropped abruptly away in front of them.

"It looks like a quarry," said the Professor, resorting to French for the word "quarry," whose Arabic equivalent he could not call to mind at the moment. The *qaouaji* did not answer. Instead he stood still and turned his head, as if listening. And indeed, from somewhere down below, but very far below, came the faint sound of a low flute. The *qaouaji* nodded his head slowly several times. Then he said: "The path begins here. You can see it well all the way. The rock is white and the moon is strong. So you can see well. I am going back now and sleep. It is late. You can give me what you like."

Standing there at the edge of the abyss which at each moment looked deeper, with the dark face of the *qaouaji* framed in its moonlit burnous close to his own face, the Professor asked himself exactly what he felt. Indignation, curiosity, fear, perhaps, but most of all relief and the hope that this was not a trick, the hope that the *qaouaji* would really leave him alone and turn back without him.

He stepped back a little from the edge, and fumbled in his pocket for a loose note, because he did not want to show his wallet. Fortunately there was a fifty-franc bill there, which he took out and handed to the man. He knew the *qaouaji* was pleased, and so he paid no attention when he heard him saying: "It is not enough. I have to walk a long way home and there are dogs. . . ."

"Thank you and good night," said the Professor, sitting down with his legs drawn up under him, and lighting a cigarette. He felt almost happy.

"Give me only one cigarette," pleaded the man.

"Of course," he said, a bit curtly, and he held up the pack.

The *qaouaji* squatted close beside him. His face was not pleasant to see. "What is it?" thought the Professor, terrified again, as he held out his lighted cigarette toward him.

The man's eyes were almost closed. It was the most obvious registering of concentrated scheming the Professor had ever seen. When the second cigarette was burning, he ventured to say to the still-squatting Arab: "What are you thinking about?"

The other drew on his cigarette deliberately, and seemed about to speak. Then his expression changed to one of satisfaction, but he did not speak. A cool wind had risen in the air, and the Professor shivered. The sound of the flute came up from the depths below at intervals, sometimes mingled with the scraping of nearby palm fronds one against the other. "These people are not primitives," the Professor found himself saying in his mind.

"Good," said the *qaouaji*, rising slowly. "Keep your money. Fifty francs is enough. It is an honor." Then he went back into French: "*Ti n'as qu' à descendre, to' droit.*" He spat, chuckled (or was the Professor hysterical?), and strode away quickly.

The Professor was in a state of nerves. He lit another cigarette, and found his lips moving automatically. They were saying: "Is this a situation or a predicament? This is ridiculous." He sat very still for several minutes, waiting for a sense of reality to come to him. He stretched out on the hard, cold ground and looked up at the moon. It was almost like looking straight at the sun. If he shifted his gaze a little at a time, he could make a string of weaker moons across the sky. "Incredible," he whispered. Then he sat up quickly and looked about. There was no guarantee that the *qaouaji* really had gone back to town. He got to his feet and looked over the edge of the precipice. In the moonlight the bottom seemed miles away. And there was nothing to give it scale; not a tree, not a house, not a person. . . . He listened for the flute, and heard only the wind going by his ears. A sudden violent desire to run back to the road seized him, and he turned and looked in the direction the *qaouaji* had taken. At the same time he felt softly of his wallet in his breast pocket. Then he spat over the edge of the cliff. Then he made water over it, and listened intently, like a child. This gave him the impetus to start down the path into the abyss. Curiously enough, he was not dizzy. But prudently he kept from peering to his right, over the edge. It was a steady and steep downward climb. The monotony of it put him into a frame of mind not unlike that which had been induced by the bus ride. He was murmuring "Hassan Ramani" again, repeatedly and in rhythm. He stopped, furious with himself for the sinister overtones

the name now suggested to him. He decided he was exhausted from the trip. "And the walk," he added.

He was now well down the gigantic cliff, but the moon, being directly overhead, gave as much light as ever. Only the wind was left behind, above, to wander among the trees, to blow through the dusty streets of Aïn Tadouirt, into the hall of the Grand Hotel Saharien, and under the door of his little room.

It occurred to him that he ought to ask himself why he was doing this irrational thing, but he was intelligent enough to know that since he was doing it, it was not so important to probe for explanations at that moment.

Suddenly the earth was flat beneath his feet. He had reached the bottom sooner than he had expected. He stepped ahead distrustfully still, as if he expected another treacherous drop. It was so hard to know in this uniform, dim brightness. Before he knew what had happened the dog was upon him, a heavy mass of fur trying to push him backwards, a sharp nail rubbing down his chest, a straining of muscles against him to get the teeth into his neck. The Professor thought: "I refuse to die this way." The dog fell back; it looked like an Eskimo dog. As it sprang again, he called out, very loud: "Ay!" It fell against him, there was a confusion of sensations and a pain somewhere. There was also the sound of voices very near to him, and he could not understand what they were saying. Something cold and metallic was pushed brutally against his spine as the dog still hung for a second by his teeth from a mass of clothing and perhaps flesh. The Professor knew it was a gun, and he raised his hands, shouting in Moghrebi: "Take away the dog!" But the gun merely pushed him forward, and since the dog, once it was back on the ground, did not leap again, he took a step ahead. The gun kept pushing; he kept taking steps. Again he heard voices, but the person directly behind him said nothing. People seemed to be running about; it sounded that way, at least. For his eyes, he discovered, were still shut tight against the dog's attack. He opened them. A group of men was advancing toward him. They were dressed in the black clothes of the Reguibat. "The Reguibat is a cloud across the face of the sun." "When the Reguibat appears the righteous man turns away." In how many shops and market-places he had heard these maxims uttered banteringly among friends. Never to a Reguibat, to be sure, for these men do not frequent towns. They send a representative in disguise, to arrange with shady elements there for the disposal of captured goods. "An opportunity," he thought quickly, "of testing the accuracy of such statements." He did not doubt for a moment that the adventure would prove to be a kind of warning against such foolishness on his part—a warning which in retrospect would be half sinister, half farcical.

Two snarling dogs came running from behind the oncoming men and threw themselves at his legs. He was scandalized to note that no one paid any attention to this breach of etiquette. The gun pushed him harder as he tried to sidestep the animals' noisy assault. Again he cried: "The dogs! Take them away!" The gun shoved him forward with great force and he fell, almost at the feet of the crowd of men facing him. The dogs were wrenching at his hands and arms. A boot kicked them aside, yelping, and then with increased vigor it kicked the Professor in the hip. Then came a chorus of kicks from different sides, and he was rolled violently about on the earth for a while. During this time he was conscious of hands reaching into his pockets and removing everything from them. He tried to say: "You have all my money; stop kicking me!" But his bruised facial muscles would not work; he felt himself pouting and that was all. Someone dealt him a terrific blow on the head, and he thought: "Now at least I shall lose consciousness, thank Heaven." Still he went on being aware of the guttural voices he could not understand, and of being bound tightly about the ankles and chest. Then there was black silence that opened like a wound from time to time, to let in the soft, deep notes of the flute playing the same succession of notes again and again. Suddenly he felt excruciating pain everywhere—pain and cold. "So I have been unconscious, after all," he thought. In spite of that, the present seemed only like a direct continuation of what had gone before.

It was growing faintly light. There were camels near where he was lying; he could hear their gurgling and their heavy breathing. He could not bring himself to attempt opening his eyes, just in case it should turn out to be impossible. However, when he heard someone approaching, he found that he had no difficulty in seeing.

The man looked at him dispassionately in the gray morning light. With one hand he pinched together the Professor's nostrils. When the Professor opened his mouth to breathe, the man swiftly seized his tongue and pulled on it with all his might. The Professor was gagging and catching his breath; he did not see what was happening. He could not distinguish the pain of the brutal yanking from that of the sharp knife. Then there was an endless choking and spitting that went on automatically, as though he were scarcely a part of it. The word "operation" kept going through his mind; it calmed his terror somewhat as he sank back into darkness.

The caravan left sometime toward midmorning. The Professor, not unconscious, but in a state of utter stupor, still gagging and drooling blood, was dumped doubled-up into a sack and tied at one side of a camel. The lower end of the enormous amphitheater contained a natural gate in the rocks. The camels, swift *mehara*, were lightly laden on this trip. They passed through single file, and slowly mounted the gentle slope

that led up into the beginning of the desert. That night, at a stop behind some low hills, the men took him out, still in a state which permitted no thought, and over the dusty rags that remained of his clothing they fastened a series of curious belts made of the bottoms of tin cans strung together. One after another of these bright girdles was wired about his torso, his arms and legs, even across his face, until he was entirely within a suit of armor that covered him with its circular metal scales. There was a good deal of merriment during this decking-out of the Professor. One man brought out a flute and a younger one did a not ungraceful caricature of an Ouled Naïl executing a cane dance. The Professor was no longer conscious; to be exact, he existed in the middle of the movements made by these other men. When they had finished dressing him the way they wished him to look, they stuffed some food under the tin bangles hanging over his face. Even though he chewed mechanically, most of it eventually fell out onto the ground. They put him back into the sack and left him there.

Two days later they arrived at one of their own encampments. There were women and children here in the tents, and the men had to drive away the snarling dogs they had left there to guard them. When they emptied the Professor out of his sack, there were screams of fright, and it took several hours to convince the last woman that he was harmless, although there had been no doubt from the start that he was a valuable possession. After a few days they began to move on again, taking everything with them, and traveling only at night as the terrain grew warmer.

Even when all his wounds had healed and he felt no more pain, the Professor did not begin to think again; he ate and defecated, and he danced when he was bidden, a senseless hopping up and down that delighted the children, principally because of the wonderful jangling racket it made. And he generally slept through the heat of the day, in among the camels.

Wending its way southeast, the caravan avoided all stationary civilization. In a few weeks they reached a new plateau, wholly wild and with a sparse vegetation. Here they pitched camp and remained, while the *mehara* were turned loose to graze. Everyone was happy here; the weather was cooler and there was a well only a few hours away on a seldom-frequented trail. It was here they conceived the idea of taking the Professor to Fogara and selling him to the Touareg.

It was a full year before they carried out this project. By this time the Professor was much better trained. He could do a handspring, make a series of fearful growling noises which had, nevertheless, a certain element of humor; and when the Reguibat removed the tin from his face they discovered he could grimace admirably while he danced. They also taught him a few basic obscene gestures which never failed to elicit de-

lighted shrieks from the women. He was now brought forth only after especially abundant meals, when there was music and festivity. He easily fell in with their sense of ritual, and evolved an elementary sort of "program" to present when he was called for: dancing, rolling on the ground, imitating certain animals, and finally rushing toward the group in feigned anger, to see the resultant confusion and hilarity.

When three of the men set out for Fogara with him, they took four *mehara* with them, and he rode astride his quite naturally. No precautions were taken to guard him, save he was kept among them, one man always staying at the rear of the party. They came within sight of the walls at dawn, and they waited among the rocks all day. At dusk the youngest started out, and in three hours he returned with a friend who carried a stout cane. They tried to put the Professor through his routine then and there, but the man from Fogara was in a hurry to get back to town, so they all set out on the *mehara*.

In the town they went directly to the villager's home, where they had coffee in the courtyard sitting among the camels. Here the Professor went into his act again, and this time there was prolonged merriment and much rubbing together of hands. An agreement was reached, a sum of money paid, and the Reguibat withdrew, leaving the Professor in the house of the man with the cane, who did not delay in locking him into a tiny enclosure off the courtyard.

The next day was an important one in the Professor's life, for it was then that pain began to stir again in his being. A group of men came to the house, among whom was a venerable gentleman, better clothed than those others who spent their time flattering him, setting fervent kisses upon his hands and the edges of his garments. This person made a point of going into classical Arabic from time to time, to impress the others, who had not learned a word of the Koran. Thus his conversation would run more or less as follows: "Perhaps at In Salah. The French there are stupid. Celestial vengeance is approaching. Let us not hasten it. Praise the highest and cast thine anathema against idols. With paint on his face. In case the police wish to look close." The others listened and agreed, nodding their heads slowly and solemnly. And the Professor in his stall beside him listened, too. That is, he was *conscious* of the sound of the old man's Arabic. The words penetrated for the first time in many months. Noises, then: "Celestial vengeance is approaching." Then: "It is an honor. Fifty francs is enough. Keep your money. Good." And the *qaouaji* squatting near him at the edge of the precipice. Then "anathema against idols" and more gibberish. He turned over panting on the sand and forgot about it. But the pain had begun. It operated in a kind of delirium, because he had begun to enter into consciousness again. When the man opened the door and prodded him with his cane, he cried out in rage, and everyone laughed.

They got him into his feet, but he would not dance. He stood before them, staring at the ground, stubbornly refusing to move. The owner was furious, and so annoyed by the laughter of the others that he felt obliged to send them away, saying that he would await a more propitious time for exhibiting his property, because he dared not show his anger before the elder. However, when they had left he dealt the Professor a violent blow on the shoulder with his cane, called him various obscene things, and went out into the street, slamming the gate behind him. He walked straight to the street of the Ouled Nail, because he was sure of finding the Reguibat there among the girls, spending the money. And there in a tent he found one of them still abed, while an Ouled Nail washed the tea glasses. He walked in and almost decapitated the man before the latter had even attempted to sit up. Then he threw his razor on the bed and ran out.

The Ouled Nail saw the blood, screamed, ran out of her tent into the next, and soon emerged from that with four girls who rushed together into the coffee house and told the *qaouaji* who had killed the Reguibat. It was only a matter of an hour before the French military police had caught him at a friend's house, and dragged him off to the barracks. That night the Professor had nothing to eat, and the next afternoon, in the slow sharpening of his consciousness caused by increasing hunger, he walked aimlessly about the courtyard and the rooms that gave onto it. There was no one. In one room a calendar hung on the wall. The Professor watched nervously, like a dog watching a fly in front of its nose. On the white paper were black objects that made sounds in his head. He heard them: "*Grande Epicerie du Sahel. Juin. Lundi, Mardi, Mercredi. . .*"

The tiny inkmarks of which a symphony consists may have been made long ago, but when they are fulfilled in sound they become imminent and mighty. So a kind of music of feeling began to play in the Professor's head, increasing in volume as he looked at the mud wall, and he had the feeling that he was performing what had been written for him long ago. He felt like weeping; he felt like roaring through the little house, upsetting and smashing the few breakable objects. His emotion got no further than this one overwhelming desire. So, bellowing as loud as he could, he attacked the house and its belongings. Then he attacked the door into the street, which resisted for a while and finally broke. He climbed through the opening made by the boards he had ripped apart, and still bellowing and shaking his arms in the air to make as loud a jangling as possible, he began to gallop along the quiet street toward the gateway of the town. A few people looked at him with great curiosity. As he passed the garage, the last building before the high mud archway that framed the desert beyond, a French soldier saw him. "*Tiens,*" he said to himself, "a holy maniac."

STEPHEN CRANE

The Blue Hotel

Again, it was sunset time. The Professor ran beneath the arched gate, turned his face toward the red sky, and began to trot along the Piste d'In Salah, straight into the setting sun. Behind him, from the garage, the soldier took a pot shot at him for good luck. The bullet whistled dangerously near the Professor's head, and his yelling rose into an indignant lament as he waved his arms more wildly, and hopped high into the air at every few steps, in an access of terror.

The soldier watched a while, smiling, as the cavorting figure grew smaller in the oncoming evening darkness, and the rattling of the tin became a part of the great silence out there beyond the gate. The wall of the garage as he leaned against it still gave forth heat, left there by the sun, but even then the lunar chill was growing in the air.

The Palace Hotel at Fort Romper was painted a light blue, a shade that is on the legs of a kind of heron, causing the bird to declare its position against any background. The Palace Hotel, then, was always screaming and howling in a way that made the dazzling winter landscape of Nebraska seem only a gray swampish hush. It stood alone on the prairie, and when the snow was falling the town two hundred yards away was not visible. But when the traveler alighted at the railway station he was obliged to pass the Palace Hotel before he could come upon the company of low clapboard houses which composed Fort Romper, and it was not to be thought that any traveler could pass the Palace Hotel without looking at it. Pat Scully, the proprietor, had proved himself a master of strategy when he chose his paints. It is true that on clear days, when the great transcontinental expresses, long lines of swaying Pullmans, swept through Fort Romper, passengers were overcome at the sight, and the cult that knows the brown-reds and the subdivisions of the dark greens of the East expressed shame, pity, horror, in a laugh. But to the citizens of this prairie town and to the people who would naturally stop there, Pat Scully had performed a feat. With this opulence and splendor, these creeds, classes, egotisms, that streamed through Romper on the rails day after day, they had no color in common.

As if the displayed delights of such a blue hotel were not sufficiently enticing, it was Scully's habit to go every morning and evening to meet the leisurely trains that stopped at Romper and work his seductions upon any man that he might see wavering, gripsack in hand.

One morning, when a snow-cruled engine dragged its long string of freight cars and its one passenger coach to the station, Scully performed the marvel of catching three men. One was a shaky and quick-eyed Swede, with a great shining cheap valise; one was a tall bronzed cowboy, who was on his way to a ranch near the Dakota line; one was a little silent