Of Atlases and False Projections

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Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2005

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and

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English Department Honors Project
April 2005
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At 7:30 she would wake up to the sound of Evelyn closing the dishwasher next door and yelling at her daughter to hurry up. At 8:05 Martin Robinson left his fifth-floor apartment, his shoes loud and hollow, like the echoing in a cave in Kentucky, and she, one floor underneath, a stalagmite, still waiting for something, she didn’t know what. At 8:10 the couple directly under her, and their three children, would leave together loudly, clanging like pots and pans. A few minutes after 8:15, R. Perry would pull his heavy white door shut and walk down the fourth floor hallway, past her door, to the stairs in a rhythm that always reminded her of ballet, something graceful and choreographed with such intent and beauty and expression, something imported from Russia on a secret cargo ship that had snuck into America during the Cold War, furtively like black ice on the highway, and into R. Perry, which she called him only because she did not know his first name, only knew him at all because his mailbox and apartment were right next to hers. And once, about a year ago, after she heard his door close she had gone to her own door, and looked out the peephole, and had seen him walk past, talking with another man, who she couldn’t see because he was hidden by R. Perry, whose shoulders blocked the man’s head. R. Perry was laughing, even though it was morning, wearing a black jacket and gray pants, and later that week she had seen him checking his mail as she was coming into the building; he was wearing the same jacket, and he had a red scarf on, and black pants.

She had forgotten, at this point, why she had never met him, but perhaps it didn’t matter. He probably had a lot of things to think about, perhaps he was very important, controlled some kind of bank or oversaw financial mergers or consulted foreign investors,
and did not have any time, in all senses of the word, to get to know his neighbors. Their schedules didn’t really overlap, either, because he left earlier than she did every morning, and most evenings she would go to the Streetlight Bar and Club after work, where she would occasionally do the lighting, but more often would sit at the small brown table to the left of the stage, near the door that led to the back, with a glass of red wine, just listening. But in either case, by the time she would get home, R. Perry would almost certainly be asleep. He got up early. When she awoke she would hear him in the kitchen, making coffee, eggs maybe. And then there was a lot of silence. Maybe he was reading the paper, doing a crossword puzzle, writing letters, darning socks. This was her favorite thing about him, she thought—this silence in the morning, and the consistency of it, how he didn’t hurry into the chaos and impetuous rush of the day. It made him different than everyone else. And it made her keep listening. When he was done in the kitchen, done with his silence, he would get in the shower, the pipes loud like semi-trucks. And then he would get dressed, grab his briefcase, and leave. So they would miss each other, again. Maybe they’d seen each other on the stairwell before, a few times, nodded, maybe on the way to the Laundromat, and maybe once she thought she had seen him during her lunch break, when she had gone around the corner to this sandwich shop for grilled chicken on sourdough, lettuce, red onion, black pepper and olive oil, and a man who at least from the back looked like R. Perry had gotten out of a taxi across the street—it was a wide street though, many lanes, and a lot of cars—turned left and appeared to have entered into a woman’s clothing boutique, where a white, plastic mannequin wearing a lime green top stood stiffly and stared with uninterested eyes at all that happened outside her window. So maybe they’d seen each other before—like how she saw the same people on the bus
every morning—but not frequently enough to really do more than smile; names would have too much, too forced. Names seemed superfluous, anyway. Weren’t the images, the smells, the sensations that people invoked more important than their actual names? Names that they really had no part in choosing, that they were bequeathed, like from a king pointing his scepter at the crowd, or Mussolini on that balcony in Rome, standing austere and strong and saying to the Italians “People of Italy!”?

Her own name, Nora, she was not particularly attached to. It acted, of course, as a marker, an indication of individuation and existence, but she hardly considered it essential. She would have preferred if people addressed her by the particular emotion or thought that provoked that specific utterance. Of course these would be ephemeral markers, they would change like shadows depending on the time of day, the cloud cover, the season, the amount of foliage, but they would mean something! They would actually reflect the feelings of the speaker, they would symbolize an aspect of the relationship between the participants, they would create some kind of connection, some kind of meaning. And so, perhaps if, for example, she had wanted to talk to her mother about her plans after high school she might have addressed her as “you-who-must-let-me-make-my-own-decisions,” or if she had wanted to say something to her uncle Paul who she hadn’t seen in six years she might call him “you-who-frightens-me-with-talk-of-death-and-finality,” or if she ever happened to say anything to R. Perry, she might call out to him, as he went downstairs with his blue bag of dirty clothes, “you-who-I-only-know-by-the-sounds-and-thoughts-I-have-of-you,” and he would glance up at her and smile, hello. If only names were like that, if only they meant something!
At 9:10 Nora would push the afghan her grandmother had knitted her off her feet and get out of bed, sometimes she’d shower, depending (on the number of eggs in the fridge? on the way the sun looked on the bubble of paint in the corner of her bedroom ceiling? on the color of the pen on her nightstand? if there was any shampoo?), and then she’d get dressed, generally she would eat something—a banana, a cup of soup, some toast—and grab her purse, a jacket, leave to catch the 9:53 bus that would get her to the art center by 10:10, 10:20 if there was a lot of traffic or snow, either way which left her plenty of time to get her paints out, the brushes for her 11:00 Fundamentals of Painting class—mostly senior citizens—where they would practice color wheels or grids on canvases, Nora talking slowly and encouragingly, stepping over walkers and oxygen tanks and IVs and hired nurses, white ambulance stretchers, EKG machines, defibrillators, clear plastic bags of blood, ready to be infused, nodding at lines and shading, offering a steady hand, until 1:00, when she would have lunch, usually from one of the vendors—a hot dog, a burrito, a falafel—on the streets as she made her way to the community college where she taught Painting I or II, depending on the day of the week, and a class on color or still-life, depending on the semester. For these classes Nora hardly ever walked around the room, critiquing; she thought it made the students too nervous. She would sit at a desk and read books recommended to her from an acquaintance in the English department—Calvino, Kundera, Swift—and wait for a hand to raise, and then she would stand up and go over to the student, mention something about value or shadow, repetition or brush technique, then maybe walk around the room once, glancing at paintings and saying things that sounded positive, this would go on, the class would end, Nora would finish her chapter, maybe chat with those who lingered. By 6:00 all her classes would be
finished and she would clean up the room a little for the janitor, leave the building and depending on the weather, walk or take the train to the Streetlight, where every night she received a free meal as payment for her otherwise voluntary services in the position of back-up lighting director.

She liked most to do the shows with vocalists, where the singer had a voice that sounded like pebbles in a coffee can, or heavy rain on spare tires left in a yard, with horn solos of prolonged silence and affectation, brilliant and translucent notes; the shows where the lighting needed to be deliberate and intense and commanding in both its presence and its absence. This was what she was good at. Better than at music itself, where she was only mediocre, had clumsy, stiff fingers like she had spent the day outside in the cold, without gloves. Her chords were messy and tedious, predictable because she didn’t know enough to do anything else. She perhaps had the passion, but she lacked the talent and the patience to go anywhere with it. But light, she could do. And these nights that she worked she would eat her dinner up in the booth while the singer went through his set, and she would close her eyes, and she would concentrate on the how the voice would create light. That was how she saw it, actually: the voice creating light and then she, with her equipment, simply acting as a mirror for that light, a way that it could show itself to the audience. She, through her work, was the medium through which the music, and the musicians, became something more than memorized progressions and scales. She saw herself as a factor as important, perhaps even more so, as the tuning of the instruments, the embouchure of the trombonist, the brushes of the drummer, the poise of the singer, the reeds of the sax player. She was that extra player that rested in the shadows behind the upright bass, the loud tapping heel of the clarinetist; she was the
valve oil for the trumpet, the guitar pick, the ride cymbal—just moving everything along. She was the discreet, essential element that made the band real and focused, exited and innovative and soulful. She was what made these performances mean something, that kept live music meaning something, that kept people from just putting their headphones on and turning the volume up high. It was important, necessary, therefore, that she was practiced and knew her cues, that she was ready, that she had the ear of the rhythm guitar player, slapping his off-beats to match the high-hat, or the tenor sax waiting that extra second, holding a note—so when he started up again, into something fast and complicated, his triplets would echo those of the bass. Nora was like any musician, any musician who thought and cried about his work, his music; who practiced, who cared. So she would chew her grilled whitefish and listen for light.

But it was only sometimes, when she would work like this: once or twice a week, usually less. Generally she would just eat in the back, in the kitchen, resting her elbows on bright steel, twirling her fork or her hair, trying not to laugh at the crude jokes of the line chefs, to appear stoic and disinterested, mature, as boys too young to dress themselves looked at her with discerning eyes, wiped their knives on their white aprons, turned their heads and said things in voices too low to hear, rubbed their attempts at facial hair. But she didn’t really mind, she even liked it in the kitchen, well enough. It was warm, and it was friendly, like a kind drunk relative, and she was happy staying there while she ate. When the crowd started coming in, she would slip her red, ceramic plate into the dish stack, and walk out the kitchen door, which brought her next to the bar, where she would pour herself a glass of Merlot, Chianti, Bordeaux, Pinot Noir, whatever
was open, and walk to her table near the stage, on the left side, pull out the soft wooden
chair, set her wine glass on the table, and wait for it to begin.

After the show, after she had sat at her table, or up in the lighting booth, after
thinking about the music—the song choice, adaptations, the timing of the percussion, all
the things that made the show good, or bad, or interesting, whatever it might be—she
would walk to the El and catch the last train home. She always sat in the front car, near
the door, and she would put her face near the window, so when the tracks passed close to
an apartment building she could see, maybe, between cracked blinds or dirty
windowpanes, glimpses, flashes like a few frames from a movie, of somebody else’s
life—a couple sitting at a small kitchen table, sharing graham crackers and peanut butter,
the woman starting to peel a grapefruit; a girl in pajamas leaning against a wall and
whispering into the phone, trying to keep her laughter soft; a thin man in shorts, on an
unmade bed and playing a guitar, practicing scales, or writing lyrics on the album covers
of the LPs stacked around him; a cat looking out into the night from a dark room, its tail
twitching slightly, thinking of mice; an old woman sitting in a brown chair with a blanket
over her knees, watching reruns of television programs from the Fifties and Sixties; so
many people. So many separate people, with their separate lives. Three million separate
people doing separate things. But could this really be? Could they really be as removed
from another as much as they all thought themselves to be? Wasn’t there something that
could bring them together? Wasn’t there something that made each of them more than
just the bodies they occupied? Maybe wasn’t there something else? Maybe weren’t they
connected? Maybe?
Maybe the girl who was talking to her best friend whose grandmother was watching Ozzie and Harriet, the episode where Rick starts dating someone else because Joyce is too busy spending her time knitting a sweater for him, was talking about the guitar player, who was feverishly writing a song about her, a song that he would sing the next day on a park bench near the office of the woman who was eating a grapefruit, who would be struck by its emotion, and she would throw a dollar into his hat and hum the tune on her way back to work, where the cat who was resting behind some trashcans would hear it and follow the woman for a block, where Nora, who was making her way to the community college, would see it and stop to pet it for a few minutes. Or maybe the man breaking the crackers in half worked in the repair shop that fixed the television of the old woman, who had had to go the senior center near her house with a friend of hers who was taking an art class taught by Nora, to watch The Beverly Hillbillies, a show the woman didn’t even like, but a show that the man in shorts, who worked part time as a cook at the senior center, enjoyed very much, so much that he had decided to write a concept album based completely on the 1965 season, which happened to be the year that the mother of the girl who was on the phone was pushed on the playground by the fruit eating woman, and the mother, who was only eight at the time, had to limp home by herself, because her own mother—the whispering girl’s grandmother—was going to school to become a veterinarian, and was, as her daughter was being shoved to the ground, learning about the feline declawing process. Or maybe the husband worked in the music store where the thin man who had bought a doughnut from the fruit-eating woman who had ridden once in a taxi driven by the cat’s owner who had, with the money he made that day, bought a nicer piece of meat from the old woman’s butcher shop which
he shared then with his cat, which ended up being sold a few months later, because his new girlfriend, the whispering girl, was allergic to cats, to R. Perry, had bought his guitar. Or maybe. Or maybe they were just strangers.

And then Nora would feel a throbbing, desolate sadness, like cramps deep in the tissue of her body. It was a sadness that seemed like it had been with her her entire life, since parturition, maybe before. She didn’t know exactly when it had started, but it felt like it had been there for a long time, growing like yeast in warm water with the wait, until it rose from the mess of ground wheat and salt into swollen round loaves once she had come into the city, and it sat on floured countertops, risen and ready. This sadness like the sadness of the Spanish guitar, or some high, wailing melody played on the tenth fret by Carlos Santana, buh duh da det duh daah, on his pearl-inlaid PRS, with the doves. This sadness so intrinsic now in her life in the city, that she forgot about it sometimes, that maybe it seemed natural, normal, like wind, like skyscrapers. And sitting on the hard plastic seat of the El, when this sadness came, despite her attempts to unite and create community, she would feel very much alone.

During the day things were better. During the day people were supposed to be rushing around and moving quickly and keeping strict schedules, were supposed to be focused on themselves and moving themselves and it was ok that she wasn’t talking, not really talking, to people, more than words of instruction and praise or greeting, superficial interlocutions about the weather or the food. Yes, in the daytime it was all right that this happened, and sometimes, she even enjoyed it. She enjoyed the solace found between the arching necks of the buildings, the strange ecosystem of asphalt and moss and light, and she would feel particularly alive, and connected to the city around her.
Like after a rainstorm, when the asphalt shone like glass and reflected the insides of the concrete thirty-eight stories above, the diaphanous membrane glowing pink and yellow in the thick humidity as the tall thin buildings shrugged their shoulders, unburdening themselves of the weight of the water and thunder—the products of gluttonous clouds, of overindulgence—and tried to begin again, to make their concrete skin opaque again.

These moments seemed to have occurred for a reason. A reason she was not quite sure of, but a reason that certainly existed, though perhaps it was hidden under the fat skin of the bear preparing for hibernation. She was glad to be in the city then, around so much sound and color and thought, and would feel the uncontrollable urge to be a part of it all, to walk. She would end class early, if she had to, to walk during these moments. With measured and thoughtful steps, careful not to disturb the circularity or the tide of a puddle, she would walk. Walk in circles around a clump of trees or around the block of her apartment building, leaving tracks, or down long stretches of sidewalk towards the shining water, water like the water that fell from the dripping wings of the birds that roosted high up in the cracks between slippery buildings, the view from the room simply another concrete wall, and Bartleby would scream for the first time, after the rain, during these walks.

There was, then, a delayed sense of purpose that would only seem to materialize, like doves from a magician’s hat, when the walk was nearly over. In fact, perhaps it was the appearance of this purpose that signaled to Nora that it was indeed concluding, and that therefore this purpose would remain as something that she knew existed, but was unable to be explored further, as she was unable to retrace her steps now—being that the walk was nearly ended—and spend more time at a particular line in the pavement, or next
to the green glass door of the dentist’s office, and instead must try desperately to recall specificities that might aid her in her recollection of the walk later, as she sat on her couch in the evening with a full pack of cigarettes and no matches, a glass of orange juice, in a dim half-light like how it must be in Sweden right before the solstice, staring at a framed photograph of Nina Simone that hung on the wall in front of her. The picture was from when Nina was younger, maybe thirty, maybe less, and her eyes were closed and she was singing some smooth, low note into the microphone. One hand was on her lap, and one hand was resting on the piano keys, like it was lazy, except with Nina it was just thinking about what it wanted to do next, some major arpeggio, trilling and classical, or a flat third leading into something much deeper, like a swamp hung with Spanish moss and drying alligator skins or the plains with humidity and dust, Mississippi Goddamn, this fatidic left hand just waiting, just waiting, for Nina to stop singing. Or maybe it wouldn’t wait, maybe it would just start when it wanted to, slinking its way up to middle C before Nina noticed, playing a minor seventh, something really simple and pure, and then the vibrations in the vocal chords, in the chest cavity down into the liver and stomach, even in those two strong lips, would stop. And Nina would look at that deviant left hand, and smile very slightly, and move her right hand back to the piano, and the bass player behind her, the tall black man with his hands folded around the neck of his instrument like a Bible looking at Nina and thinking “and who shall I say is calling?” like some minister, would begin to slowly thump out his notes as Nina yelled out defiantly in absolute vivacity that she’s “not going there.” Oh Nina. You-who-sing-the-earth.

Because it was something beyond words and phrasing, what Nina said. It was something more, something that reached back, way back, that didn’t necessitate mundane,
quotidian human interaction for understanding and acceptance and deliverance. She had this power, this eloquence, this primal cognition. She made sense, it that deep and ingrained way. What Nina had was this antediluvian pocket of air that rested inside her stomach and would at times loosen itself from her bowels and come storming upwards, into her head, a bulge of innocence and wickedness, ripe and fruitful before a flood. It was humanity, what she had, and she gave it to anyone who listened. She gave them knowledge, fleeting knowledge often ignored, but knowledge ceded, granted like hailstones—as small as peas—melting under hard-soled shoes. She like a priestess would baptize and give unction, perform the holy rites for those who believed. And Nora believed, maybe more than anyone else, in what Nina could do, in what Nina did. Because Nina gave Nora a place, she grounded her with rhythm and phrasing which turned something borrowed into something permanently and completely hers, so it belonged to Nina more than it ever had to the original songwriter. She was more than a messenger, she created new meaning and enhanced what was already present. Nina’s songs like dirt roads after a storm, difficult and maybe even treacherous, but there. Nina allowed Nora to be alone without being lonely. “I intend to be independently blue,” Nina said, she asserted, she demanded, and Nora, as she sat on the worn upholstery like an arid landscape, tumbleweeds and sullen patches of grass dormant in a heavy acedia, would stare at that picture and think about her coming submersion, would think about Nina Simone.

The afternoon classes were cancelled at the community college—she didn’t remember why—and when she had finished at the senior citizens and had had something
to eat, she decided to walk to the Streetlight. The walk was long, but it was nice out. She was working that night; the head lighting director, Peter, had a kid with the flu, had to stay home with him. There seemed to be sickness going around, perhaps since the unforeseen warm weather had brought people out of their winter scarves and hats and sweaters early, too early, and straight into the arms of a cruel and vindictive spring. The weather and her tricks! How spiteful she was. Nora had grown up on the East Coast, one of the endless suburbs of Boston or New York or Philadelphia, perhaps they were all the same, and she had thought that the weather was malicious there. Only after living here did she realize how absolutely deluded she had been. Summers were hotter here, winters were colder, springs were longer, falls were shorter; it was more intense, more extreme. But now, after nearly nine years, perhaps she was used to it. Or rather, she was used to the unpredictability of it, to the thunderstorms that made her walls rattle and her ears ring, the sky green and yellow like a salad, to the humidity like a wet towel wrapped around her, to the icy snarl of winter. The unpredictability became the norm. It was like a game, really. Every morning she had to pick the best combination of things—umbrella hat sweater (how thick?)—she could wear that could allow her to adapt to the greatest variety of conditions. She was warm from walking, now, and from the distant sun overhead. She unbuttoned her coat.

She was walking away from the lake, to the west. The sidewalk was crowded, people standing near doorways chewing and talking (perhaps it was the same motion actually, a motion that encouraged digestion and continuation), happy for the unexpected sunshine. Warm weather made people so much friendlier, she thought. Warm weather lessened this feeling of rugged individualism, it made people recognize that maybe they
were actually all in this together, this act of survival in the most intimate of all jungles, on
the most intimate of all islands. Nora smiled at the two women walking past her, dressed
in brown and holding matching shopping bags. They were probably on their way back to
work after lunch. They looked like architects. The one on the left was more traditional,
she worked mainly on the remodeling projects, keeping the character of old buildings
while changing the use of their space. An old grain storage silo into a children’s
museum, huge Victorian houses into offices. Her lines were clean, she liked earth tones.
The other woman, the one on the right with the longer blond hair, sharply layered, pretty,
did new residences. She had clients in cities around the country, she even had designed a
collection of cabins for a ski resort in Switzerland. She was good at understanding the
particularities of a place, what made it unique and separate and different than anywhere
else, and although her designs were very modern, she incorporated this understanding of
history and tradition into her work. Nora liked her, this woman, she knew they would get
along. They would talk about light, maybe, how it should work in each structure, fitting
it with the sense of the place, but they would also talk about the city and politics, and
though they wouldn’t see each other that often, their conversations would always be
interesting and intimate. They would meet at bars only locals knew about, and eat olives
while they talked. Her name was Rebecca, but Nora would call her you-who-pays-
attention-to-space.

Ahead of Nora, walking in the same direction but much more slowly, there was a
small boy and his mother, or his older sister, maybe his babysitter. He was holding her
hand as his legs moved. They were purposeful, well-planned steps, each foot placed fully
down on a part of the sidewalk that had no cracks. He did not use his toes to push
himself along; instead he would lift one short leg straight out, like he was mimicking a zombie, or an inexperienced prosthetic-wearer, and then slap it down, the entire sole of his shoe hitting the ground at once. Earth-shattering steps, this child had. He would be important later, perhaps he would work as a lobbyist in Washington, or as an advocate for workers’ rights in some obscure country. He would move more quickly then, but with the same deliberation, and Nora would see him on television one day, or profiled in a magazine, or speaking at some conference, and she would remember this day, and would say to him, “oh you-whose-steps-reflect-your-thoughts, look how you’ve grown!”

Nora was turning the corner now, onto a smaller street filled like an Easter basket with interesting shops, when she saw, to her left, behind her, on the street where she had just been, R. Perry. She stopped. Where was he going? She turned around to see if she could find him. Maybe it wasn’t him, anyway. She didn’t know why he would be here now, it was a little too late for him to be eating lunch. Maybe it was a friend’s birthday, and he had to pick up a gift for her before dinner that night. Maybe he actually worked in one of these stores here—he was a travel agent? a barista? a bicycle repairman? an optometrist? Maybe it wasn’t him at all. She couldn’t find him in the crowd of people moving, back and forth across and down the sidewalk like the stitching of needlework. No, it must not have been him, he-who-is-mutable-like-thought-or-beauty.

Nora turned back to where she had been going and headed north down the quieter street. There were more trees here, and though they had just only begun to flower, she felt their shade, the shade that they possessed, though it was not always displayed, around her, and she buttoned her coat again. The Streetlight was not far from here, about a mile or so up and then to the left, west again, half a block, between a bakery and a shop that
sold old maps. An elderly woman wearing a long fur coat was walking towards her, scuffed black shoes hardly leaving the ground. The woman had wrapped her head in a large brown scarf, and the collar of the coat came up high on her neck, past her ears. She looked like some maimed animal, the unfortunate victim of urbanization and heavy traffic, with worn patches on her fur, her eyes focused only on her pain and her journey. She didn’t even seem to see Nora when they passed each other, and Nora noticed that she had thick streaks of green make-up spread over her eyes and creeping onto her face; she looked like she was molding, or maybe just carrying moss, like an Amazonian sloth.

Nora was struck by the unbearable sympathy she felt for this woman. It was disgust and humor and pity and compassion, but it was sympathy, and she wanted to, more than anything, take the thin, mangled paw of the woman and hold it while they walked. Perhaps they would sit down on a park bench and the woman would toss to the pigeons huddling around them stale bread crumbs pulled from her pocket, and Nora would press her two hands around the small, soft one of the woman, while they sat silently, just watching the birds, the other people in the park, the clouds over the sun, until it got dark and cold and Nora helped the woman up from the bench, and they walked slowly back to street—the one on which they’d met, where this had all started—and finally, for the first time in hours Nora would let go of the woman’s hand, and they would turn and go in opposite directions, neither one looking back, but Nora knowing that she had been given something, that she understood a little better, even though nothing had been said, and she would say quietly, “thank you, you-whose-wrinkles-are-your-words.”

And then suddenly there was the map store, in front of her. She had never been in it before, it had always been closed when she was around, but now, with the door open
like a grandmother’s arms smelling of fresh baked bread and cinnamon and apples, she couldn’t resist. She walked in, and without thinking rubbed her feet on the mat inside the door, like a traveler conjuring up a genie, and unbuttoned her jacket, looked around. The room was not large, but the ceilings were high, and there were many maps hanging on the walls, most of them framed, so Nora had the impression that she was a small child standing in the captain’s quarters of a large ship, and they were about to set sail, they were going to unexplored lands. Or maybe it was she who was the explorer, she who was Magellan, or Balboa, or even Cook, Ponce de Leon, Columbus, Cortes, Amundsen, checking her charts, the compass, the sexton once more, preparing for the sea. Or she was Ulysses heading back to Ithaca, believing he’d see Penelope soon, not knowing it would be twenty years, not counting on the Sirens, Cyclops, Aeolus to delay his return home, just wanting to go home. Or maybe she was Lewis and Clark, meeting with Sacagawea and thinking about the great expanse of forest and fields and mountains ahead of them—a whole nation—and anxious to begin the journey.

There was a large, ornamental globe in the center of the room, it was wooden, with the continents painted on in rich, dusty colors, fine black script naming the seas, deserts, islands. It was beautiful, delicate. Nora wanted to touch it, spin the globe with her finger poised above it, move immediately to wherever it stopped. She reached her hand out.

“That’s from 1835, an original. It’s walnut, the stand is brass.”

Nora jumped back, like she had crossed an electric fence with her collar still on. She stuck her hands in her coat pockets, far down, so maybe they couldn’t come out again. She looked up, still stiff from the shock, her bones hurting.
R. Perry was standing there, he must have just entered from the other room, the curtain dividing the two was still moving, faintly, like calm ocean water in the tropics. His hands were smudged dark with ink. Oh my god, Nora said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you, I thought you knew I was there. I was just back in the workroom, I heard you come in.” Nora still had her hands in her pockets, her mouth open, maybe she was breathing hard, maybe she was shaking. She looked at him, she didn’t say anything. “Please, go ahead and touch the globe, it’s meant to be used.”

Nora shook her head. “No, it’s ok. I was just looking, anyway.”

And then suddenly: “Wait, do I know you?”

And Nora swallowed, I-who-am-so-painfully-mute, she thought.

And he, “We live in the same building, don’t we? That’s why I recognize you.”

Nora shook her head. She agreed. “Yes, I think you’re right.”

“I can’t believe we’ve never met,” he said, and suddenly his words seemed very quick and strange, and everything was happening at once, hands out and truncated syllables and nervous, or maybe just obligatory, laughter, where was the compass to point them away from the poles? “That’s ridiculous really,” he said, “to live in the same building as someone and not even know their name.”

The same floor even, she thought. And names aren’t so important, she wanted to reassure him, don’t worry.

He stuck out his hand, his palm and fingers gray. “Well, it’s nice to finally meet you,” he left space at the end of his sentence for Nora to insert her name.

“Nora,” she said.
“It’s nice to meet you, Nora,” he repeated. “I’m.” He stopped. “My friends call me Claudius.”

“Claudius?” She must have sounded stunned. R. Perry looked embarrassed.

“Well, Claude for short. It’s the first name of Ptolemy,” he said, as if that were an explanation.

“Right,” Nora said. You-whose-words-are-Greek.

R. Perry squinted. Maybe it was a smile. “Sorry, I forget sometimes that not everyone is into maps. Ptolemy was the first person to give a detailed explanation on how one could project a spherical object, like the earth, onto a flat surface. Like a map. Using latitudinal and longitudinal lines.” He paused, maybe for emphasis, maybe waiting for her response. But then he spoke again. “I mean, there are problems, and there actually isn’t any work of his that survived, save the instructions. But it’s really amazing, actually, what he did, especially with such limited knowledge of world geography.”

“Well, he um, sounds” Nora was searching for a word that conveyed her rapture “interesting.”

R. Perry laughed. “So that’s why I’m Claudius,” he said, and shrugged. Perhaps he just realized then that his hands were dirty, or perhaps he just realized then that he needed an explanation for it, so he said, “I was just in the back, working on a map.”

“You make maps?”

He laughed again. “Kind of. I do make my own maps but right now I’m going through some ones that just came in, seeing if they need to be repaired. Some need a lot of touching-up. Do you want to see them?”

“Ok.” She said. Ok, you-who-draws-the-world.
She followed him into the backroom, the room that he had come from, the room whose entrance was covered by a large piece of red fabric, an oriental print, and she felt like she was following Marco Polo, who was coming in to speak to Kublai Khan, to tell him of his travels, to smoke opium pipes and describe magical places, people and cities and languages and flavors. Words rich like tapestry or pudding. Distant lands. She was nervous, excited. R. Perry held the curtain back for her. “Oh,” she said.

The room was larger than the front one, but its walls were completely covered in maps, pieces of maps, old brown maps and maps on cloth, new maps, maps of cities or states or forests, continents, countries, lakes, gulfs, tiny mountain villages, of deserts and archipelagos, peninsulas and isthmuses, detailed coastline, topographic and by temperature, farmland, population density, rainfall, ethnic composition, fruit production. Even maps of the stars, planets. Layers like mica of maps, a collage of the world, of everything that made it up. The room was edged with long, metal cabinets with thin drawers and there was a large work table in the center. The table had piles of maps, repair tape, pens, magnifying glasses, other cloths, things she couldn’t name, didn’t even know what they were, strange tools and colors and shapes.

She walked into the room, R. Perry came in behind her, he went over to the table. He pointed to the maps he must have been looking at before. “See, these are the ones we just got,” he said. Nora thought he said that. But maybe he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t say anything at all, maybe it was only what she thought he was saying, maybe it was her speaking, maybe she was just imagining this all, maybe it was someone else, maybe. But she wasn’t really worrying about that, about words or reality; she was looking at the maps. She was looking at these maps, of varying scales and dimensions, that told people exactly
where they were, *exactly* where they were, so there was absolutely no doubt, so they could be in the middle of the woods, or standing on the saw-tooth edge of the ocean, or a broken street in some distant city, or maybe it was the city they grew up in, and look at a map, and know that was where they were, that was how they fit into everything, how it all fit together. Everything would make sense, finally.

And to make these maps, or at least to know these maps very well, to study these maps, to trust yourself to these maps and to what they told, meant to recognize yourself, to recognize the world, to understand the intricacies of things, to be able to draw and discern with the eye of someone who sees more, who understands the larger image when others can only see the confusing simplicities. It meant to always know that you had place, you had something around with which you could define yourself and others and things and events; everything. You had a map, and you could look it and you could know, you could always know.

R. Perry, Claudius, was talking to her. “Look, these here are old maps of this area, from around 1870. It used to be almost on the outskirts of town. This building didn’t even exist, none of these buildings around here did. This block wasn’t built until, let’s see,” and then he was searching through a stack of maps, and his hands were fast and practiced, his fingernails, the lines on his knuckles knew what they were looking for, his eyes didn’t have to pay attention. “Here we go. Here’s the Streetlight, that’s the jazz club next door, and this map is from 1925, except, as you can see,” and he was pointing to symbols, scratches, marking, black and brown lines, “it wasn’t a club then, it was some kind of factory, something small-scale.”

“A factory?” she said.
“Yeah, I would say so. This building, too,” Claudius said, nodding around them, and then Nora felt the clock above her, saw the tables, lines and lines of tables in front of her, her hands moving again and again in the exact same way, her thumbs blue or green or red from the food she was canning, or her fingers stiff from sewing, or her arms sore from lifting, turning, muscles taut and large and streaked with grease, the foreman was yelling, the foreman was yelling, there was more work to be done, and it must be done faster; there was always more work to be done. She felt nervous then, and there was pressure around her, an increased pressure, like maybe she was going very far underground, and she could feel the hundreds of feet of rock above her, could feel almost every pound of it. Like she was in a mine looking for coal or gold, and the elevator had just started going up, empty, and she remembered she had forgotten her flashlight and her pick, and she was thirsty. And she wanted out.

She realized then, because she looked up from the map and saw the window on the back wall, that it was no longer day. And that she didn’t know what time it was, because the dark that came with spring was deceptive and thick and very much real, and also very unpredictable. Very unpredictable.

“What time is it?” she asked, maybe to Claudius. Maybe just to the darkness. Claudius wasn’t wearing a watch.

“It’s um,” he went into the front room and checked the cash register. Nora stayed and looked at the window. “It’s about 6:30,” he said, behind her.

“Oh my,” Nora said, because she didn’t think she was supposed to know that it was that late. And she didn’t really. “I’m sorry, you probably would’ve closed already, if I wasn’t here,” she said to Claudius.
“Not at all,” he said. “I’m the owner, I make my own hours.” And then he added, because he knew he didn’t sound convincing, “and I usually stick around here until about 7 anyway, working on a map or.” He stopped his sentence because it didn’t need to be continued.

“Right,” Nora said, because she didn’t know what else to say, and because it sounded then like she was agreeing and they were having a conversation, that suddenly things weren’t awkward.

“Right,” Claudius affirmed.

“I should probably go, then,” she said.

“Oh.” Silence. “Well, are you heading home? I mean, we’re going to the same place, we could share a cab, or take the train if you want.”

She thought about lighting, about timing and intensity and contrast, shadow. And that this was impossible to teach to anyone. You could show examples, you could give a certain amount of instruction—and she tried to do that, with her students, despite the fact that painting was nothing like actually working with light, it was much more artificial, contrived; she had even, subtly, tried to do that with Peter, though he hadn’t noticed—but you couldn’t actually teach it. You just had to know. You had to feel the light like it was the skin on your body, leaving prints of itself, visible and distinct, wherever it went. Maybe they didn’t need her at the club tonight. She hadn’t been there for sound check, anyway, so maybe she shouldn’t even go. The band was no one she knew; maybe they didn’t deserve someone like her because maybe they didn’t know music well enough, or maybe the singer had a weak, airy voice, wouldn’t have understood what she was doing.
Maybe she didn’t need to be there, not every night. Maybe she could ride home with R. Perry, just this once. Maybe.

“Yeah, ok. Let’s take a cab, I don’t feel like waiting tonight,” but what she really meant was she didn’t think she could be on a train with someone, looking at everyone else, and then at herself. She couldn’t be revealed like that, not yet.

So they left, Nora and Claudius, and they were in the taxi, he gave the directions, and then it was like they were old and married, and it had always been he who had spoken, given directions, the one in control. She, of course, had had some power in her own way, through raising the children, things like that, and among her female friends she could be fairly vocal—sometimes—but in public it was he who talked. She didn’t really mind that much, it didn’t matter to her who told the cabbie where to go, and he seemed to enjoy it. It was the same with driving: she didn’t mind not doing it, and he did. God, it had been so long since she’d driven a car, maybe she couldn’t even remember how to do it anymore. Hopefully he would never have to be rushed to the hospital, or to the airport, and the ambulance was slow in coming or the taxi late, and she would have to drive him there, more panicky than he, maybe. Because she didn’t know if she could do it.

“Turn left here,” he was saying, and then suddenly it was if they were in the mountains, they were going camping, they were trying to find this place he used to go to as a boy, and they had all their things in the back of their jeep—packs, food for a week, matches, water, sleeping bags, a deck of cards, a tent, and she had brought laminating paper and scissors, even though he told her it would just be a hassle, that she would be sick of carrying it and that he wasn’t going to, but she thought it would be a nice way to save the things they found, leaves and flowers, and she didn’t want to wait until they got
back home, when chances were everything would be squashed and torn in the bottom of her backpack under dirty socks and a damp, crumpled topographic map—and she was driving and he was navigating, and she was trying to be patient as they went up and down tiny mountain roads, looking for this one trail that probably, at this point, was either completely overgrown or had a hotel on it. And so she turned left.

“Here we are,” someone said, and there they were. And it was like they were going to her mother’s for Thanksgiving, and they had been driving all day, and they had the cranberry sauce, and the rolls, and the whole time they had both been pretending to each other that they were happy to be going there, she a little harder but doing a little better, maybe because she was more used to it than he, and they had been trying to talk about other things the entire time, trivial things, or serious things, but really were just trying to convince themselves that it’d be over soon, and then they pulled into the driveway—and of course it was the same driveway that Nora had pulled into everyday after high school, of course—and it was real and they were there.

Next there was the exchanging of money for services done, and opening and shutting of doors, the finding of keys from twisted pockets and fists and then R. Perry asked: “so what do you think?” and all she could do was make a sound, raise and shrug eyebrows and lips: “um.” And he laughed and said: “yeah, maybe it wouldn’t have been a good idea,” which was a bad thing, she thought, to have said.

“Who knows,” she said, “who knows.”

They were walking up the stairs, she was looking for her house key, and wondering what she should say as a goodbye, and now they were on the fourth floor, before she was ready for it, and she was turning right down their hallway, to where they
lived, when R. Perry said, “Well, this is where we part. I’m glad we finally met Nora, it was great talking to you.”

What. A pause, physical, verbal. Did she say that? Did he say that? R. Perry lived on the south wing of the fourth floor, the south wing, next to her, it said so on his mailbox downstairs. Next to her. What?

“I’ll see you around I guess,” Claudius said, he was starting to walk—the wrong way!—down the hall, to the other side of the building, far away, to where she had never been.

What! “Yeah,” she said, with too much emphasis, “see you. Maybe I’ll have to buy a map sometime.”

“Well, you know where to come.”

“Right.” You-who-had-given-me-explicit-and-flawed-directions. Just like your namesake. You-whose-footsteps-I-do-not-know. And then she walked down the hall, angry, and confused like she had had too much liquor, to her apartment. And she was standing in front of her door, and feeling sick, like she had just come back from the funeral of a young child who had died from a long illness or a tragic car accident, and it had been very sad, and she had given the mother a hug, because she didn’t know what else to do, but it had not been adequate, it had almost seemed inappropriate, actually; and now she was left with this nausea, this deep nausea like tar, sticky and wet, in her stomach and chest and throat. And the only thing she could think of was Nina Simone, singing a song from *Porgy and Bess*, that was so fitting it seemed like Gershwin had been thinking of Nora right now when he wrote it. But Nina did it better, anyway, than the singers from the opera, the way she held out the end of ‘stairs’ like a lonely hiss. Yeah,
that was it: Nina made it sound lonelier, just her and her voice and the piano, no orchestra, no violins.

She straightened herself, and took a breath. She looked down the hallway, to the apartment next to hers. He should be home now. He had to be. She went over to his door. She thought she might throw up. She could hear him in there, in the kitchen, pots and water, a plate, a knife. She knocked, twice, short.

A man opened the door. He was small, and older, his black hair was scribbled with white. He was wearing glasses, he had an apron on over his suit; the knot of his tie was splashed with tomato sauce. She had never seen him before. “Can I help you?” he asked. He sounded a little worried, and Nora knew that she probably looked like she had just given blood—too much blood—or escaped from a kidnapping and had hitchhiked her way home, had just barely survived torture and death.

“I,” what was she supposed to say now? She didn’t know, she had nothing to say. “My name is Nora, I live next door. I just wanted,” oh god what did she want? Answers, yes. Clear, mapped lines, with degrees and minutes, yes. Some sort of coherence, yes. To sit on her couch and listen to Nina Simone, yes. Dinner, yes. “I just wanted to know if I could borrow some milk, I’ve run out. I just need half a cup for my soup.”

“Of course, Nora. Come in. My name is Robert, it’s nice to meet you.” He held out his hand, and she took it gratefully, not sure if she would be able to walk unsupported. “I can’t believe we’ve never met before.”

Nora nodded. “It’s incredible, really.” They walked into his kitchen, it looked like hers, but it seemed fuller, there were smells of meat and brown sugar, tomatoes, garlic. He was making barbeque sauce. He took the milk out of the refrigerator, shook it.
“There’s hardly any left,” he told her. “You can just have it all.”


She went back to her apartment, unlocked the door, and stood in the dark for a long time. Then she went into the kitchen and took a glass out of the cupboard. She poured the milk into it. He was right, there wasn’t that much left. In the dark, in the kitchen, alone in the kitchen, she drank the glass of milk that Robert Perry had given her. She drank it, and then she walked over to the picture of Nina Simone and said: “I should’ve gone to the Streetlight.” And then she sat down on her couch, still holding the empty glass, in the dark, and in her own home, felt very lost.

**THE BIRDS**

Train. Sitting on a train. Three women across from him, in a row on the bench, in a train, moving towards a city. The women were friends, it seemed. They were laughing, and eating something, something that smelled of rotting onions, soil; something that shouldn’t be eaten, something that he would never eat. How could they do that, anyway, sit and eat like that, sit and waste their time?

He was on a train, he had the potential of doing so much, learning so much, feeling his body move with the train, through the land, of being a part of this omniscient,
speeding entity and not the fallible, hulking mass of humanity, but instead he had to sit here and listen to these women indulge in the uselessness of life, the meaningless laughter and chew, the pointless and insignificant distractions that simply took up time, that sat removed from any kind of continuum or intelligent thought: apple cores in the trash. He didn’t understand how anyone could do this willingly. When would he be able to remove himself from the mundanity of these distractions, these stupid distractions that stung like cayenned fingers in his eyes until his cheeks were slick like wet asphalt from his tears.

He was on a train, and he was moving, he was still but he was moving, he was traveling to a place that perhaps he knew, that he should know, but that he couldn’t quite remember. A place that held some kind of familiarity. But maybe that was only because it was like every other place he had been to, with buildings and cracked streets and restaurants, people; people moving without touching one another, walking in circles around their own shadows and batting cat paws at them, mesmerized by their changes as the day progressed. People stuck in the physical processes of breathing and sleeping, stuck in hunger and pain and thinking they’ve found truth or happiness or whatever it is that people look for, when really it’s just the soporific that comes from ignorance. God, why couldn’t those women stop talking? Didn’t they know that they were wasting their lives? Wasting his life? Painting layer upon layer of meaninglessness upon their stilled bodies? He needed sleep, a sweet turpentine sleep that would remove this artificial pigmentation, but he couldn’t find the bottle among the clutter around him; he sat with eyes wide-open. Desperately he wanted a remove from this deception, but the rotation of the wheels, the reading light, the muffled song of some headphoned teenager, the tinny
carillon arpeggios of the women’s laughter, kept him firmly grounded in the mistaken appearance of the adventurous existence of a traveler, of one without place and escaping stasis, of one unable to resist. The percussionist struck the mallet on the bells, and Adam, a diligent audience, focused on the rhythm. Like a fish in a bowl his mind circled, recircled the same plastic castle, the same plastic plant, the same scene again and again and again; his weak shadow fell onto the pebbles on the bottom of the bowl, more real than himself, and the distortion of the glass created illusions that he couldn’t understand. And so he swam in a stupor as the drawbridge lowered and then raised itself over the moat in a display of ingenuity he would never be able to mimic, newly amazed each time he passed by.

He sat backwards on the train, in the furthest seat from the cabin door. He had moved finally, desperately, tried to get as far away from those women as he could, and now he stared listlessly at the plastic of the window, trying to look beyond it to the sweeping fallows of the fields, the degradation of hue in the diminishing light, the anagogical and tropological meanings of the hills, the pattern of bird wings in the air—but instead failing, and only able to focus on concealing the struggle within him, the struggle between his frail, delicate body and his mind: the punishment for aggressive attempts at understanding. His stomach sent dizziness into his chest and head, his eyelids pulled towards one another like weak, opposing magnets—but the darkness he found there did nothing to help him focus and instead propelled him four hundred feet above the earth onto a rotting, wooden bridge, swinging cruelly in the fog, and the vertigo was too much for him, his eyes swerved violently under their lids. He had to open them,
he had to return to the greater stability of plate tectonics and seasonal change and sets of parallel lines that sadly, do not converge and will never converge no matter how far into the distance he went. He inhaled sharply through his nose, tried to wipe that thick honey away with his clumsy bear paw, tried to focus on what was outside. If only they weren’t connected, his mind and his body, if only he could think and live outside the constraints of this vehicle that impaired him and limited him to certain requisite activities and requisite feelings and responses. Because sitting backwards on a train was what he needed to do, in order to think, he was certain. He needed to look at where he’d been, to see the changing landscape in respect to what he had known. It was essential, this overtly symbolic positioning of the body. He needed to think like that—he couldn’t think about where he was going until he could at least comprehend where he had been; he was doing this both for himself and for his body, but the goddamn thing couldn’t stop thinking about itself, about its weak stomach and tired intestines, wasn’t strong enough to ignore these corporeal infirmities in order to achieve something so much greater. Where is the disconnect! he screamed down to his physical form, where is it!

As an answer he felt the rising flow of lack of control come up into his head, fall down into his thighs, and he stood up, afraid of what this malicious creature would do. He took two lumbering steps towards the closed door of the couchette—goddammit it’s closed—and felt the sharp, angry teeth of the monster as it chewed recklessly on his bowels, smacking its lips in barbaric satisfaction; his hand grasped the luggage shelf, he lunged forward, swinging like a crazed chimpanzee in a burning jungle. The other passengers looked at him, alarmed for their own safety, wishing they hadn’t told him the seat was empty, imagining him pulling out a knife from under his thick, tangled coat of
fur and stabbing them all in pure primatial furor, leaving their bloody entrails on the
ground and on the hot green vinyl of the seat, the red sticky prints of two sets of
opposable thumbs on the closed door of the couchette—goddammit it’s closed!—he was
swaying, eyes glassy, his face bile yellow. And then finally someone shoved open the
paralyzing door, and he fell into the narrow hallway, his forehead hit the opposite wall,
he grabbed vainly at something invisible in the air, his knees hit the dirty ground hard,
left sweaty prints in the dust, he stopped. Didn’t move for a second, tried to breathe.
Found hands and feet again, and crawled toward the end of the narrow walkway, to the
doors that connected his car to the next, crawled with his face nearly dragging on the floor,
as if he was some kind of second-rate detective listening for clues. At last he was there
and he slid his gelatinous form under the bottom of the door, his soft, pickled bones
congealing together as they melted from the friction of the scratch of rusty metal on his
flesh while he passed under.

He was alone in the vestibule.

He was shaking, he was hot. He inhaled and he felt the air begin to inflate his
body. Though his limbs were too stretched out, too porous to inflate, to stay afloat, lay
crumpled like old brown paper bags, his torso was thick elastic, and his swollen belly
rose to the ceiling like a helium balloon, caught on the neon light fixture and hung there,
suspended for a moment, until the pressure and the weight and the pain were too much
for it and it burst open violently, spilling its contents on the four tight walls, the
corrugated floor, onto his own dangling form which was slowly reducing itself back to
shapelessness; a soft, fluid shapelessness that spilled onto the ground and settled there on
the floor: standing water after a storm.
He was standing in the middle of a square, breathing, he felt the air enter his lungs, the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide between the alveolus and the capillary. He felt his blood glow and move through his body, agitated, anxious to deliver; and suddenly his head tilted up in near desperation and he looked at the sky. The sky, there, high, blue, planes, what else belonged in a sky? what else did he know should be in a sky? what else did he need to see? Kites maybe? Clouds or stars or rain or wind or bats or rocket ships? What was missing and why could he not think of it, why would he never be able to think of it, why did he know that he would never be able to think of it, never be able to think of it because it didn’t exist and was not in fact missing from this current sky or the one he was remembering—any sky in general, a sky—and was not even a thing or something that could be named, was actually a dimensionless indescribable non-entity too abstract and shapeless for even Carnap himself to propositionize? He moved his neck so that his head came back down again, unsure of whether or not to feel comforted by the thought that what he was looking for, what he was missing, was completely beyond the capabilities of the human mind. He tried to ignore the feeling that he was hungry, that he needed to eat something, because it kept him from understanding where and what he was. He looked around him, at the square around him, tried to focus on the architecture, the things that made it unique. There, the wall of shops and houses, window, window, window down the façade. Colors, different colors, what did he know about colors? Everywhere he went, the same colors—red, brown, blue, gray, black, white, yellow—so familiar they were hard to see. He needed food. He hated the weakness in him that forced him to admit and acquiesce to the demands of his body, but there was some sense
of clarity in this, that he needed food and therefore needed to find a place in which he could eat this food, and though he was disappointed that it was his body that gave him this sense of purpose and direction, he was grateful for its existence.

He turned at the hips and felt himself move towards an indistinguishable building, and then he was inside and the front door and the square and the sky were all behind him, he was inside and there was a man who was talking to him, a man with brown hair and a white shirt. He answered with some sort of phrase, verbal he felt, and then he was still moving, he didn’t know if he had ever stopped moving, into the corner, the corner table, the wood dark with scratches smoothed from millions of repetitive actions, where the window had just ended its proposed explanation on life and there was a space of wall on either side, holding him like forceps, and then another thesis was being offered, this time olfactorily by the swinging kitchen door and he sat there, a tabula rasa, listening to both sides with interest, and equal parts disdain and reverence, trying to comprehend the nuances of each. But that was like a pen that had dried out and no matter how hard it pressed itself into Adam, no matter how hard it tried to etch some sort of lasting impression, nothing showed, perhaps not even a dent where point touched tablet, nib touched parchment. It was only the hunger that again made him aware that something was happening, and he saw another man—still with brown hair, white shirt—looking at him and Adam knew he was again supposed to respond. “Yes.” The man smiled, waited. Adam felt his lips tighten in the usual symbol of thought, his fingers tap the table in Morse code: soup bread. The man’s foot answered back: yes. Adam’s lips moved into a smile, then opened. “The soup please, and some bread.” The man’s mouth affirmed his
choices and was pulled away by the body, away to another table, another discourse, another theory.

Adam watched the mouth as it went casually from galaxy to galaxy, exchanging information in discreet numerical form, decoding riddles that weren’t supposed to be revealed, that the mouth wasn’t supposed to understand. Adam’s own mouth began to mimic the movements of this other mouth, to form the elongated vowels, to clip certain syllables, surreptitiously attempting to discern what might be a normal and understandable future for himself. This was how he should speak. And this was how he should respond. This was how it was done. Yet he had done it before, hadn’t he? It all seemed so desperately familiar, like a record his mother used to play for him when he was a child; he could hear the silhouette of notes, a shadow of a melody, three or four words, God he thought he could almost sing it! But he knew that he wouldn’t be able to (and he didn’t even know if he wanted to: wouldn’t the banality of chatter degrade him?), not without the actual needle sliding against the grooves of the plastic, circling, spiraling around again and again, not without his mother there helping him to stand up when he fell over trying to walk; no, it would be impossible otherwise, and it was probably better this way.

Now, with the mouth of that man far away, Adam could barely see how it reacted to each situation, had no hope of imitation, of learning. He leaned back against that treacherous wall, uncertainty and bewilderment settling like fog in his brow, listening to the door swing open and close, waiting for another presentation, another lecture, another discovery or performance or speech that could bring the warmth and aridity of understanding. The kitchen began bellowing commandments, loudly, filled the air
around Adam, and he could hear nothing else but the clang of the pots as each new law was handed down. Suddenly he was too hungry to realize that he had chosen a divining stick to lead him to the desert, and that he had his map upside down, that the weather forecast he had heard the week before had the possibility of being incorrect. He could only concentrate on what was going to happen next: his food—his soup, his bread—because soon, please soon, they would be introducing themselves to him with a kind of openness and amiability that always threw him off-guard. He knew he wasn’t supposed to trust such candor, he knew that generally it was hiding something behind the bright-lipped smile. He knew this, and he had always tried to heed this knowledge, but he was afraid that he didn’t have a choice, that he had been predestined thousands of years ago to act at this exact moment in a certain way, and that there was nothing he could do to refute it.

The food came then, happily, carrying with it secrets of the land. The bread was chatting loudly with the napkin beside it, looked at Adam when it approached and stopped talking, starting singing instead, an allegretto. Adam coughed a little and tried to say something kind, but he was distracted by the dark bowl of soup that edged nearer towards him, scuffing the table with every laborious movement. Adam looked down at the soup. Within it, floating among the specks of grease in the broth, a spider’s web of things he had always thought impossible existed. He wanted to watch how they organized themselves, how they explained their otherwise improbable reality, to break through the skin of the fantastic. He leaned closer towards the bowl, hardly able to breath, not wanting to disturb any type of unstable surface tension, and looked over the blue ceramic rim into the soup, waiting. Excited. Hungry to learn. Too hungry. The hand
that held the spoon came rushing down quickly, he had no control—it dropped from an airplane over a sleeping town, exploded upon impact with the ground, left few houses standing, even fewer survivors, with the stomach screaming ‘victory, victory!’ wildly and Adam feeling himself succumb to the early celebration, the spraying champagne, but also wanting to stay and mourn over the dead, to wear black and burn incense for days, not moving, not talking. Yet everyone told him that what had happened was right, and that he should be happy, and so he was persuaded into feeling satisfaction, or at least satiation, as the soup entered his body and sank down to his stomach.

The man with the brown hair and the white shirt—the waiter, that’s who he was—came back to Adam, took away his empty bowl, wiped the crumbs off the table in front of him, brought back more soup, more bread. Adam thanked him, had to speak loudly to be heard over the kitchen, chewed, swallowed in time to the door, swallowed. He couldn’t look at anything else except for his soup, his bread; he couldn’t look up. The light coming through the window was too bright, it hurt his eyes. He was still chewing, but his soup was gone now, he wiped the bowl with his bread, he chewed, swallowed for the last time, and closed his eyes. The exclamations of the kitchen seemed less menacing, less absolute, now that he had eaten. He was in the comfortable position of being able to consider them as suggestions of a way he could go, they were simply helpful directions. He opened his eyes. The waiter had taken his dishes. He looked at the table in front of him. In the sunlight that was carefully being painted onto it in strokes like the long, gentle waves of the deep ocean, it seemed newer, less battered. The bill was there, folded neatly and placed in the corner. Adam knew he wouldn’t be able to understand what it told him, wouldn’t be able to understand anything except the words ‘soup’ and ‘bread,’
and he didn’t even want to try. He opened his wallet and took the soft pieces of paper out, looked at them and decided which one he thought looked most like his soup, and which one like his bread. He placed them on top of the bill, stood up, and left.

In the square again, outside, sunlight on the top of his head, he heard the pigeons walking on the cobblestone, the cement. Their feet—some with stumps for toes, missing toes, no toes at all—seemed to slide the birds across the ground like cross-country skis or figure skates; a triple axel as two pigeons both went towards a crumb dropped by a child eating a sweet, round pastry; a toe loop, a spin to escape the wheels of a bicycle as it cut through the square, fast. Pigeons rose, straight up as if pulled by strings, paused in the air, eye-level with the woman on the bicycle, and they stared at each other, woman, pigeon, pigeon, pigeon, pigeon, pigeon. Two brown eyes to ten black. Understanding. And then it was over and the pigeons tucked what they had of their feet into the soft gray feathers of their lower abdomen, veered away, up, sixty-five degree angles towards the sky. He couldn’t help but follow their flight upwards, his head was pulled by the same string that had lifted the birds, he felt it cock back, and he looked at the sky. Yes, that was what was missing, that was what he hadn’t been able to remember, or couldn’t understand, at least partially: it was pigeons. But not only pigeons, all birds, all birds, the millions of paths of birds across the sky, trailing a thin thread of silk behind them, weaving a map, a net, a extensive constellation across the firmament, so thick and intricate that it became nearly invisible, a transparent pattern, a faint outline. Adam wished he could trace the map of the birds, copy it down onto ginger-colored draft paper that he could fold up and put in his back pocket, pull out on long overnight train rides, in the middle of the night, when the cabins were nearly silent: just the heavy breathing of the old man near the end of the
car, the boot clicks of the conductor as he walked down the aisle, looking out the windows towards the darkened water, black and fluid, permanently staining ink. He wanted to pull out the bird map then, and hold it up in the space above him, and let the light from the moon drip through it like wax from a slowly burning candle, until the paths of flight of every bird shone bright—iridescent algae on the ocean—until it stung too much to look any longer, so he had to close his eyes—and when he did he would still be able to see the bird map illuminated on the underside of the lids: just as clear, just as accurate. Then finally he would be able to inspect the map carefully, studying it with agony, until he found the one spot where no bird crossed, where there was no path, the one point of darkness in all of that light; and in the comfort of drowsiness he would feel himself being pulled to that spot, and he would fall asleep like that, to the sound of feathered wings rushing past him, as he slept suspended in quivering air.

On the smudged and cluttered palette of the landscape, with buildings that stood like threadbare sweaters, the outlines of the trees nearly visible through the thinning wool, five crisp figures, nameless, unimportant, straight like pencils, walked briskly and purposefully across the scene, leaving behind them, unlike the varying shades of secondary and tertiary colors already present, thick contrasting brush strokes, both void and full of light.

The clean, clear sky of midday watched their approach with caution, and warned the others, who began to glow brown and gray and blue in the heat that filled the air like water in cotton. The distant greens and yellows started their soft, plaintive wail, muted in the background like far-off highway traffic or the rhythmic thumping of a ball on the hard
ground, while undiscovered pinks and oranges, hirsute and unkempt, sang jeremiads to far-away celestial lovers in a daily attempt to lure their beloveds away from the puerile games and enticements of other skies. The figures, unaware of the surrounding apprehension that pressed into their flesh like the broad fingers of a blacksmith, continued walking, continued leaving their obtrusive trail. In a moment, they were gone, and Adam, alone on stone steps in the square, still warm from a day of sun, was again an uninterrupted pastel on the canvas.

He sat motionless, with the wave of distinction already long gone, and watched the gray stone around him slip in and out of mountain chains, rows of houses, churches, office buildings, statues, ancient temples, quarries, in the diminishing intensity of sunlight. It was the time of day when dusk was still using its egg tooth, still protected and inhibited by the seemingly obdurate shell. It was the time of day when life was more vibrant, when everything exuded a refractive mist that distorted and changed the typical colors of the day into hues found only in fairytales or forests from long ago, before things were how they are. It was the time of day in which breathing sometimes became difficult, because of the fear that the intake, the suck of air, even if it had been announced days back, would create an unexpected disturbance: small perhaps, but enough to change the entire pressure system of this most delicate environment and send whirling winds and sudden temperature drops down into the land, lightening bolts that shattered entire forests, hailstones the size of ripe plums that ripped into the newly thatched roofs, and rain that could flood a pasture within the minute, wash out a major road. Everything would be damaged to a point where the best option was demolition with the intent of starting again somewhere and sometime else. So the armies were called in, with their warhorses and
cannons and orders to destroy, and then Poseidon, who had been waiting, his thick nose fuming, watching the distorted images of a city he had always secretly loved, and burning with fraternal wrath, rose up from the sea with his triton burning hot and angry, and spat mouthfuls of water onto the land, extinguishing the fires but killing everyone, and beginning a battle that went far beyond temporal disturbances and entered into the realm of Olympus.

With the awareness of one who has been in a situation before, Adam waited. He waited with a patience that had been practiced for thousands of years, that he knew to be ingrained in him under millennia of layers of dead skin, a patience that could outlast nearly any external stimulus, that could keep him there, alone on the canvas, until chiaroscuro or paint thinner smeared the thin stroke of lavender that he was into the purple around him. He waited, full of soup and bread, for the transformation to begin, for his body to condense, tighten from the weight of millions of people walking on him, from years and years of feeling them doing this. He waited for petrifaction, for his body to permanently conform itself to where it was, his feet, legs, stomach, chest, head to become simply a part of the steps. He would finally be able to understand everything he had wanted to feel, everything he had been trying to comprehend for his entire life, it would finally happen, and it would be perfect. The colors that ebbed into one another with the familiarity and comfort that comes with being close friends for a long time would also be a part of him. He would be the stone, he would know the footsteps of every single thing that had ever walked across him, in matrimony or death or simply as a place to sit, to peck for crumbs or laugh with friends, sit shivering in the cold with plaintive eyes and cupped hands. He would know the ponderous steps of the old and the fleeting ones, like
flickers of light on a windowpane, of the young; the scratches of a dog, the rain and snow and dust and leaves and fog of the earth, he would know it all, and he would move from the weak mass of bones and blood and hair to something that was the pure and solid abstraction of knowledge, and understood everything because it knew how it fit in with everything else. It knew its purpose and knew the reactions of everything towards it, could focus only on magnifying this enlightened existence because it didn’t have to concern itself with the base maladies of mortality. He could finally eliminate the malleability that rendered his life so easily affected, kneaded and fashioned by the practiced potter’s fingers of external circumstance and physical condition; he would indurate and exist in the perfect state of being—that of pure understanding and belonging—and then this confusion of place and time and purpose would evaporate like shallow puddles of rainwater on a hot day, and the landscape would be made complete, without flaw.

He heard the clicking spokes of spinning bicycle wheels entering the square, peddled with the casual deliberation of a tranquil rider. He tried to imagine rubber tires on stone, how it would feel. A fast, linear motion, compliant to the solidity of the rock, respectful of its strength. Unusual but not rare, welcomed perhaps for the change it brought and how it added to the understanding of the whole. It was now in the late stages of dusk, and the call and response, the vibrancy, of the colors before had descended into a dim grotto of a nearly monochromatic vesper. The low, practiced tones soothed him. He thought he could feel the calcification set into his phalanges, he thought maybe by morning he would feel the sun hit him as cold marble, not as man shivering from a night spent outside. He heard the bicycle slow down, the faint squeaking of brakes. He
couldn’t help but turn his head, almost in annoyance, to see where it had stopped, to see what had clanged discordant in his meditation.

From where he was, the outline of the bicycle was visible, not so far from him, but the distance was great enough that in the oncoming darkness the details of both rider and machine were incomprehensible. The rider—a woman he felt—was sitting on an old wooden bench near the center of the square, with the bicycle leaning contentedly against the backrest. He could hear her smiling and humming to herself. He knew she couldn’t see him, he who sat motionless and camouflage on the steps, he knew she thought she was alone. He watched her, and he tried to place her in the context of the scene, to remember what her footsteps had felt like, how many times they had climbed him, where they had rested, what they had meant…careless sometimes, ignoring rhythm and technique, nearly hopping; and other times with a delicacy that was almost painful—it was so precise, so focused—but always with a lingering pause, just before her right foot left the final step she would twist her body so as if to look at something beyond her, behind her or above her, it wasn’t always consistent where she looked, but she always looked, she was always looking. Adam felt the movement, readjustment of her body as she had repositioned herself, waited that extra second before taking the final step back onto the square; he felt the pause, the weight shifting from her left leg to her right, to the toe, everything was concentrated in the toe, and then the soft redistributing of responsibility back into the thigh and the knee, as the hips and shoulders looked elsewhere, upwards, onwards, higher…

He heard her whistling. He was a man again. Whistling to herself softly, leaning back against the bench so that her hair fell over it and onto the bicycle seat, whistling a
slow song of clear notes and simple melody. It left her mouth quietly, the song, but it brought itself forward into the cool, still evening without reservation; it gave itself to the square. Adam suddenly could feel the chill that had been dripping down, like an old faucet, into the night air; the marble steps were cold and he began to shiver, involuntarily. He was cold and would have to leave tonight, leave everything he had ever thought to desire or want, he would have to leave this square, so perfectly attuned to the complexities of life, and he would have to succumb to blankets and warm water and other false comforts. He had been too weak. Again, he was too weak.

He stood up then, and the whistling stopped. There was movement on the bench, the embarrassed intimations of one who had not meant to be noticed, whose thoughts had been meant for the night and not for him. The song had discovered him, had seen him as the weakness that he was and had climbed up the bell tower and alerted the town of the presence of this intruder, this intruder with intentions of invasion and infiltration, this intruder that needed to be identified and prosecuted immediately.

“It’s a lovely evening isn’t it?”

Adam’s head moved quickly, he looked around, a frightened rabbit sensing a hawk.

“Isn’t it?” she repeated. “When the night is like this, when it’s…” Her voice lifted at the end, like the wings of a bird, hedging her statement, asking for his participation in the conversation.

Adam’s head, as if by instinct, warily turned toward the sky, then back in the direction of the woman. He didn’t want to play this game, Wittgenstein’s game of give and take, moving pieces on a playing board. He didn’t answer. He started walking,
walking away from the woman, out of the square. He stopped when he reached the edge of it, waited for her to say something. But she had moved her token from the board, brought it somewhere else. He heard the idiophonic wheels of the bicycle on the cobblestone like maracas, the cadence of the peddling legs, and the smooth tones of the almost bird-like whistling as she moved out of the square like air through a clarinet. Adam took a breath and kept walking.

Midday. The sun high and hot above him. On the train again. He hated to be on the train again. The train was not a mistake, but the train was weak, it was an imperfect invention of humans. Perhaps the theory of it was well-founded, but in practice it had become almost comical. He was near the aisle this time, still facing backwards, always facing backwards, trying to ignore the cricket voices of the women behind him, looking at the empty seat across from him, concentrating on the color, a bright blue, a blue he would have expected to find in cruise ship casinos, cruise ships that sailed through the Caribbean, bringing hundreds and hundred of pink passengers to the succulent and seductive riches of the islands—the fruit, the booze, the sand—the bright colors of the boat reflecting all the fun they’ll have while on their cruise! and not on this train, this slow-moving northbound train, only serving to transport him from where he just was to where he’d already been. That’s how it was really; even if he’d never seen the place before he’d already been there, somehow, some way. He realized that the logistics of how this happened were unclear, that they didn’t make much sense, but that didn’t concern him much. How necessary was factual truth or empirical data—the plastic wrap over the rich casserole of absolute truth brought to the potluck—when the contrived
could bring one at least to the edges of the dish, where the cheese had been burned from being in the oven a little too long, could bring one to a more than superficial acknowledgment that indeed a meal existed—and even this distorted by the thin pastel covering—into the actual ingredients, to taste a part of what was there?

A hill sloped shallowly upwards from the tracks, and Adam turned his head and followed its curve to a point in the fields some distance from the train. There was a house there, a gray house, he was almost surprised to see it, he hadn’t expected a house to be here in this desolation, he certainly hadn’t remembered it from trips past, not from any of them, moving in any direction, on any set of tracks. Why hadn’t he noticed it before? It couldn’t be a new house, not here. There were no new houses here. He closed his eyes tightly and opened them, he was confused. Why was he seeing this house for the first time? Why hadn’t he noticed it before? He sat upright now, in his chair, concentrated on the house. He felt the muscles in his legs extend, contract and he was standing up, his arms reached for his suitcase and his jacket, he felt the scalding weight on his chest as the engineer applied the brakes and the train—the wizard who’d been casting spells on him, who he’d believed for so long, who was packing up his snakes and spiders and mushrooms and smoothing his cloak, combing his beard—began to decelerate, and the weight burned and Adam’s legs jerked and he tripped and fell onto his knees in the carpeted aisle, his arms had flung themselves and his jacket uselessly into the air and onto the lap of some woman, whose brown eyes squinted in confusion as Adam lifted his hands off her, felt for his jacket while his face turned towards the ground, tried to think of something to say as an explanation, an apology, though he didn’t really want to apologize. He wanted to explain that it wasn’t his fault at all, that he had simply been
the recipient of yet another malicious incantation by the resentful magician, that he, Adam, had had nothing to do with it really, but that he was sorry that it had happened, and to have a nice trip and watch out for potions. His hand had finally found the jacket and he pulled it towards him embarrassed, kept his head down as he stood up, reached down for his bag, wanted to go, to move to the door, since the train was nearly stopped and even though he didn’t know why exactly he had stood up in the first place, made motions to get off, he had to leave now, he couldn’t sit back down, couldn’t stay here. He turned his head and looked back at the woman, went to smile, knew he wouldn’t be able to say anything that she would believe or understand. But there was no one there. No one, there was no one except him and the wizard, the wizard who laughed loud black smoke and cawed like a crow as the train stopped indefinitely at the station. He stumbled, frightened, to the door, it was already open, his feet found the steps, he heard the cauldron bubbling under him, and closing his eyes, breathing heavily, so much he could hardly move, he departed from the train.

He was standing outside the station, breathing heavily. He was glad to have gotten away. But to where? He was standing outside the station, a small gray building with one ticket-booth that he had rushed past in his haste to get outside, as far from the train as he could, not even noticing the name of the town printed on the timetable that hung over the door. And he had left the station intending to run, intending to run into the town and to the square and to sit in the square, on some steps in the square and sit there until something happened but as soon as he had run through the station, bruising his hand badly on the way out when it struck the doorframe hard, trying to shove it open, not knowing he had to pull, he had stopped. Abrupt, like a dog that had reached the end of its
line. Stopped. Panting. Where was he? Why was he here? He couldn’t remember; he had tried so hard to escape, and now he couldn’t even remember why. What is happening, he thought. He felt so sick, his whole body felt sick. He wanted to be a snake, to shed his body from himself, cast it aside and grow something new, something better, more durable. Something impenetrable to normal corporal stimulations, something that could shield him from the annoyances that had thus far been preventing him from actualizing his potential, his truth.

From where he stood, outside of the station, at the end of a dirt road, he could see the incline of the hills as they stretched back away from him. They were healthy and plump from the fecundity of late spring and a good crop, they glistened shades of green in the heavy afternoon sun like melting crayons. The road that led away from the station was firm and dry, well compacted, a dark band of gray and brown that followed the bend of the landscape effortlessly, as if its hundreds of years of use had made it something natural, as if the hills had acquiesced to its superiority and had molded themselves to fit its contours, instead of it to theirs. He hadn’t even noticed it from the train, so well had it become a part of the scene.

He squinted his eyes in the bright light, tracing the path of the road with his finger. He could see no town, no cars, nothing that indicated why this was a stop on the train’s route, why there was a station here. He followed the road up, farther and farther. There—on the intersection of the peak of a hill and the turning of the road, was the house he had seen from the train, the house that had caused his legs to act without his consent and bring him to this place. He had forgotten entirely, in his anxiety to leave, about this house. About this house that he had never seen, that he could have, previous to just a few
minutes ago, sworn with all assuredness and certainty to absolutely not exist. It sat there, unassuming, almost shy in its appearance, as if it hadn’t wanted Adam to notice its arrival. He stared at it, this house. Why was it here? He couldn’t understand it. He would’ve recognized it, its place in the horizon—both in this horizon and the horizon of everywhere he’d ever been—because he felt the presence of everything, and even if he’d never seen it surely he would’ve been aware of its existence. Isn’t that what he was? Or at least what he was becoming? And something as physical as a house, with walls and a roof, usually doors—he could practically draw the blueprint in the dust of the road—something so tangible, something that everybody saw, why had he not seen it? It was impossible; there was no explanation except that it hadn’t existed until that day, until the very moment his eyes had perceived it, on the hill, the illusory pinprick in his thumb as he was unfolding the quilt.

He heard a voice behind him, saying something, probably to him. He turned, expecting to find some sort of god—good or evil he didn’t know, he didn’t want to know—some sort of construct of light and sound and thought that would lead him into the depths of the universe, a willing guide to circles unimagined by Dante. It was a woman, a woman with dark brown eyes and thin legs. She repeated herself.

“Do you need something?” Her voice was light like silk and snagged on the question mark in the sudden gust of wind from her words which pulled it upwards and landed it there.

Adam said nothing at first, just looked at her. Who was she? The woman’s eyes squinted in confusion. Adam felt his face warm in mutual recognition and embarrassment.
“You’re the man from the train, aren’t you?” she asked him. Even though Adam knew she must be laughing at him, she spoke to him politely, formally. Adam turned his head away, nodded vaguely in assent.

“I grew up around here, I know the area pretty well.” She stopped for a second, seemed to be thinking about her words. “Are you sure you don’t need anything?” Adam looked up at her as she spoke, his lips closed. She was not very tall, this woman, this woman of the hills, of uncertain heritage, descended from apparitions and non-existent foundations, with dark hair that hung to her shoulders and who asked questions to which he could not find the words or the strength to reply.

“Listen, my parents still live here, in the house I grew up in, it’s up over there. Do you see it?” She turned her body and stretched out her arm with the graceful motion of one who has spent years practicing it, like a salesman showing his wares or a dervish pulling back the brightly covered entrance to his tent and whispering ‘enter’ with a gleam in his masterful eye. Adam didn’t even move to follow her gesture, he knew where she was pointing, he kept looking at her, trying to see if he could see through her, trying to determine if she was real. The woman must have felt him and twisted back to look at him, her mouth still open, in question. She took a step toward him, arms akimbo, and tilted her head up to look at him. His body tensed, he thought about running. He felt her breath on his chin, warm. “So?” her eyes challenged.

A man she called her father had come down, descended down from the hills like a sudden autumn fog, to get them. He was driving a red car, with rust that crept up it like ivy on trellises. Adam had watched the car as it approached where they were standing.
The man drove slowly, deliberately, as if expecting something to happen, something to jump out in front of him. When he stopped the car the woman ran over to him, kissed his wrinkled cheek, they said affectionate sounding things to each other that Adam couldn’t hear, couldn’t understand. He stood there, hating the awkwardness of his own posture, his demeanor, hating the way his body betrayed his mental discomfort, hating the repetition, the obviousness of himself, of everyone. The statue he was was misshapen and graceless, modeled after the realities, not the ideals, of man. Finally he had reached a certain level on the Mohs scale, enough to be considered rocklike, but carved from sandstone he lacked the warmth and curve, the beauty, of marble. He was rough and he weathered easily. He was weak and fatiscient, already his nose had fallen off, his left arm was nearly gone. He couldn’t last more than a few days in the elements: the rain and the wind, even the gentle ones, would wear him quickly, and he and the pedestal upon which he had placed himself would be reduced to a small pile of stones. What was he doing here, what had he been thinking? Why had he left? What did he want to happen? Adam stood there, feeling the weight of his limbs, his body, that pulled him slowly, slowly deeper into the ground. His head hurt. He was hot, standing in the sun. He was hungry.

“Are you ready?” the woman called to him. She was walking over to him, she took his suitcase, put it in the back if the car. Adam followed behind her, stiffly, feeling pieces of himself fall off and crack on the road. He was nothing more than a torso, a leg, by the time he arrived at the car. He got in, somehow. He noticed the dust he was leaving on the seats, he was embarrassed. He wanted to apologize, and maybe to explain,
to say something as the engine started and the car began to move. He wanted to but of course he couldn’t—why the predictability?—he screamed to himself.

They were at the bottom of a hill, in a depression in the land just before the incline, and from the limited view in the car the hill before them seemed to continue on indefinitely. The overwhelmingness of the situation suddenly made Adam dizzy, and as the car began its ascent he had to close his eyes. He didn’t see, as they climbed slowly, and the old man carefully moved the shifter, pressed down the clutch, urging the car with his gentleness to move onward, the men, in clothes faded and recolored brown after years of use and time spent in the sun, working in the orchards, picking fruit, moving through the rows, baskets heavily laden with their labor, checking the health of each tree, stopping occasionally in the shade of one to sit and roll cigarettes. He didn’t see the girl, maybe fourteen or fifteen, who lay beneath the almond boughs, digging her bare toes into the soft, rich soil under her, reading and absentmindedly putting a plum into her mouth, chewing without taking her attention off the book. He didn’t see the dust of the road, swirling like a nebula, closely following the car up the hill like a small child to her mother. He didn’t see the young olive trees, slowly preparing themselves for their own harvest in the fall, anxious to bear fruit. He kept his eyes closed and tried to forget that the breeze that came in hot and orange through the window and eroded the lines of his face. He tried to forget that he was crumbling. He tried to think of theory and philosophy, of rules for discourse and conceptual interaction, of abstract mathematics, of pure being and floating above the spin of the earth after having escaped from the heavy pull of gravity, so light in his existence. Geology and absolute being. He tried to think of all these things but he couldn’t lift his feet from the thick mud of everyday life, the
squelch of soup and produce, of work and sleep and trains and eyes and stone and simple words and fruit peels; this mud that held him firm to his flimsy pedestal, so that even though his head and limbs would deteriorate his ankles and toes would remain forever ingrained in this mud, this mud through which he had plodded for years, trying to escape from it before it dried and kept him forever, in false petrifaction. He needed real stone, something pure that wouldn’t break and wear down after only a short attempt at eternality.

He felt the car slow down, he heard the old man cough. The woman touched his disintegrating shoulder. “We’re home,” she said. “Would you like to come out?”

Adam hesitated before opening his eyes. He didn’t know what he was going to see, but he was afraid that it might hurt him. He felt the woman waiting for him, like ripe, heavy fruit ready to fall, to do something. He opened his eyes. The car was parked next to the house he had seen from the train, the house he hadn’t believed existed. His window faced a yellow wooden door, an entrance to the kitchen perhaps, where a cat was sitting halfway in shadow, licking a paw intently, concentrating on the fur between the toes. Adam’s eyes squinted automatically from the glare of the mid-afternoon sun through the cracked windshield. The house was of dark gray stone, small. One level. A vegetable garden stretched out long like swimmers’ arms from the back of the house. An old cart, once painted blue and red, was standing near the tomatoes, leaning lazily on one leg. He heard something tapping on his window. It was the brown-eyed woman. He hadn’t noticed that she had left the car.

“Would you like to come out and meet my mother and have something to eat?” she smiled at him, the words escaping through the space where her teeth met. Adam didn’t know if he should trust her, she who knew so much, who had so easily invited him
here, she who floated between the realms of real and unreal. He didn’t know what to do. He wondered how long he could stay in the car until his body disappeared completely, so when the doors were finally opened the draft would blow the pieces of him into the yard and he would disperse like dead leaves, to be raked up later or left as mulch for the garden. But he didn’t want to be mulch, rotting and helpful only because his decay aided the growth of something else. What kind of life was that? Why was he stuck between progress and stagnancy? Why was he in some sort of indefinable state—neither rock nor flesh, neither god nor man—which nothing he had studied, nothing he had learned or practiced, could pull him from? Why was he not finding anything he wanted to find?

Adam felt his empty stomach yawn. He hated that he was hungry. He didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t stone at all, not even sedimentary. He was just a convincing imposter, a nearly believable imitation standing posed and painted in a wax museum. And now, in the heat, his Icarus wings began to drip. He thought he was falling.

The door opened next to him, he felt fingers on his seatbelt, he was leaving the car. He was in the sunlight and he could see the orchards—pears, oranges, figs—around him and perhaps there was the sea in the distance and he felt old and weak and very confused. He was hungry. And tired. He could barely move. His feet shuffled slowly across the grass as he walked towards the house. The woman was next to him, she held his arm as if he was sick and might fall. They were at the door now, the yellow door. The cat didn’t move; he kept licking his paw and looked interestedly at the woman. The door stood loose in its hinges and she pushed it open with the flat palm of her hand.

They entered into the kitchen. Adam could smell the year in it, the particularities of each season. There was a woman there, with her back towards them, bent over the
counter, old with hair that looked as if it would peel off her head like birch bark, and she turned with the motion of a clock hand when the hour changes to greet them. She walked over and hugged her daughter’s face with her hands, and Adam saw that she had been cutting tomatoes, he saw seeds on the daughter’s cheeks.

“Oh, I am so glad that you’re here,” she said to them, her voice like the plucked strings of a lute. “Please, go sit down, I am almost finished.”

There was a doorway across from where Adam stood that led deeper into the house, and through it he could see a table, set with four places. Adam swallowed. There was something about the kitchen he liked, something eternal about it. He knew that this kitchen and this food and those motions of the old woman had been happening for thousands and thousands of years, that nothing of any importance had changed, and that nothing of any importance would change. There was solidity within the boiling of water and slicing of vegetables, the baking of bread and pressing of oil, the washing and rewashing of dishes. He was surprised that he had never thought of that before. It comforted him a bit, he didn’t want to leave it. He looked at the brown-eyed woman next to him. She tilted her head like a bird towards the other room and looked back at him.

“Go ahead,” she said, “sit,” and Adam had to obey. He walked under the low-hanging lintel of the doorway to the table he had seen and sat down. Before him, an old ceramic plate, white with a blue edge, looked up at him like his own reflection in a pool of water. In the kitchen he heard the women talking, he couldn’t understand them. He looked back down at the plate, tried to understand what its expressions meant. He thought it was saying something to him, something muted under the layers of glaze. He couldn’t understand it. He was so hungry.
The smells of the kitchen came in hot to the table and branded him, he screamed in pain. The young woman came in then, carrying a basket of bread and a pitcher of water. She was concerned. “What’s wrong?” she asked him. “Is everything ok?” Adam tried to smile, cough. The plate, understanding the problem, began to speak again, to explain what had happened. Adam looked at the woman. She seemed to have understood; she nodded with seriousness and put a piece of the bread down on the plate. She sat down by Adam and took a piece of bread for herself. She poured water into her glass, then his. She began eating her bread, tearing off a piece of it and placing it between her lips, letting it fall back into her mouth, started to move her jaw. She said nothing. She watched Adam. Adam watched her. Adam could hear her molars clicking together as they chewed the bread. He swallowed. He said nothing. They looked at each other. Adam didn’t blink, and as his eyes began to water he thought he saw small white and brown feathers appear on the neck of the woman, he thought he saw her arms widen and become wings. Her torso rounded and grew; more white feathers covered her breast. Her mouth was a beak, her eyes small, her feet long and thin and yellow, clawed at the end. Still they said nothing. Still he didn’t blink. He stared and watched as she lifted her wings, as if to show off to him, as if to prove to him that it was true. Adam was nearly crying now, his eyes burned, he had to close them.

He reopened them immediately—he had only blinked—and now there was a rush of air and steam and the old woman entered the room carrying a bowl of food, and the old man followed behind her with another dish—he must have just come in, Adam could smell the loam on his shoes—and the young woman reached with her arms, long and slender, to help them and pour water and now everyone was sitting, there was food on the
plates, a confusion of smell and ideas and states of truth and being, and they were eating, they were all eating, Adam brought his fork to his mouth, again and again, he kept eating. Eating bright colors and the sound of the train and marble steps and windows in restaurants and bicycle tires, fig leaves, dry dirt roads, and dizziness and garden tools and questions, fading light and the flight of birds. He tasted everything, he tasted every single thing that had come and would go into the food, every single part of him and the land and the old woman and her daughter. What had once served as a desiccant was now white-capped and crashing upon him and he was soaking wet and dripping on the floor, he felt the puddle around his feet, he felt the water in his hair trickle down his face. He tried to wipe his eyes but the water was coming down too quickly, so he succumbed, and he kept eating.

Finally, he was saturated, over saturated. He put his fork down, he looked around him. The light from the descending sun snuck between the folds of the yellow curtains behind him and landed on the faces of the people around him; they glowed like moons. Adam swallowed.

“The meal was very good, thank you,” he said. His voice sounded strange, different. It had a cadence that reminded him of flapping wings.

The old woman smiled, looked at her daughter. Then she said to him, “You’re welcome.” She looked at him directly when she spoke, and Adam felt his body lighten, his chest swell. He was hot and tired, his head felt small.

The old woman asked, “Would you like to take a walk outside?” Adam hesitated. He didn’t know if he wanted to leave this room, this deep well of a room that smelled damply of comfort and bread and sun. He thought he had found something here,
something that had been caked on like limestone, something he had always before considered a nuisance and tried to ignore. But it was something, down at the very bottom, that maybe was worth rubbing his fingers in, feeling the grit under his nails, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted to leave it. What if he couldn’t find it when he came back? And what if he never came back?

The young woman, the brown-haired woman, looked at him. Adam thought he heard her whistling. “A walk would be good, I think. Don’t you think so?” She started whistling again.

Adam took a breath. He had to answer her. He understood that her question was not one of rhetoric. It was one that necessitated an answer, a suspended fourth that demanded a resolve to the third. He positioned his trembling hands over the keys. “Yes,” he exhaled, finding the note, though he was a little flat. “Yes I think a walk would be very good.”

He was between the squash and the peppers, on the edge of the beans, facing away from the house. He said nothing as the woman, the brown-haired woman from the train, the brown-haired woman who knew too much and walked slowly up and down the rows behind him, picking beans. He would have looked up, into the sky, to see what was in this sky, if everything he thought when he thought sky was also present here, but it was evening now, and to look up and away from the house would have meant to look into the sun; so he lowered his head and said nothing. He could hear her behind him, singing to herself, something he had heard before.
Why did you do this? he asked her silently. But it was as if she had heard him say it out loud because suddenly she stopped singing and set her red plastic bowl of beans down and walked over to him. She put her hands, hands that smelled green with blood and bone and leaves and bugs, on his head and tilted it backwards, so that his face and squinting eyes were hit by the evening light. “Look,” she said, “look,” her words brusque and efficient; he didn’t think to question, to pause, he just looked. And he saw, coming from the west, with sea salt and wind, the birds. Three birds flying neatly through the warm shadowed air, feathers like paring knives cutting sharp turns and undulations. Three birds flying, and then the whole flock was there, above them, her hands still on his head, still guiding him. And he wanting to look away because it was almost too much, those birds with her hands and the taste of the food still on the inside of his cheeks, still on his teeth and gums. But she, firm and sure, kept him like that—she knew—and he couldn’t turn away. So they stood, watching. The path of the birds across the sky, the graceful motion of bird wings in the air. The lift and fall and stretch of feathers, bird feet next to bird abdomens stabilized and turned by clean bird tails, birds in flight. They stared at the birds until Adam’s body screamed for release, a release from broken pedestals and broken limbs that kept him stagnant and suffering, and it shook the ground around them. The woman’s hands dropped from his face, maybe she had felt the pain, too, and she went back over to the beans. Adam brought his head down and the plinth that feebly tried to bear his weight groaned with relief. He turned his head towards the garden and watched the woman walk, watched this strangely avian woman, with perceptive hands, this woman who seemed to already know him and everything he thought and said and did, this woman whose form he couldn’t quite comprehend; and he
realized, standing on this make-believe hill by this make-believe house, that he had already known her, too. She was the women on the train, she was in the restaurant, she was riding her bicycle through the pigeons and she was on the bench whistling and knowing all along, all the time, that he was there. Adam felt light, almost dizzy. He could still hear the sound of the birds above him. He walked over to the woman, who was kneeling in the dirt looking for ripe beans on the vine, her head moving up and down like she was pecking for worms.

He stood next to her for a long time, watching her work. Watching her thin fingers pluck bean stems from the stalk, two or three in quick succession, and then place them in her red bowl. He watched gently her pull the small green weeds from around the plants. He stood and watched her as she moved down the rows, slowly slowly. He stood in the oncoming darkness, rushing in like the morning tide, until his feet sank heavily into the ground and he couldn’t see her brown eyes as she came towards him with her bowl full. The sky was deep shades of violet and indigo, colors of deliverance and comprehension, and with it came that familiar sensation of cold marble and immobility, and it pressed on Adam like an iron straight from the smoldering coals. It hurt and he winced and the woman reached out her hand to touch his burning shoulder. “Weren’t the birds beautiful?” she said.

Adam’s mouth was dry, he tried to swallow, he looked away. “Yes,” he said finally, and he felt the cool air come around him like a blanket. The woman was still touching his arm and he looked at her again, and he tried to see what she was, if she was mostly grass or fruit or bird, because he didn’t know, and he wanted to know, he needed to know. He needed to know because he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t even know
what exactly he wanted at this point. He just knew that whatever this woman had, this
omniscient brown-eyed woman, he wanted also, more than he wanted stone and silence.
So he looked at her, through her, trying to find out. He looked until his sight was blurred
with tears and a low pain vibrated through his body like a bassoon, nearly shaking him as
it dipped into the lower registers, the notes far below the staff. His eyes were weak and
ignorant and wanted to close, wanted to fight against this pain, but that couldn’t happen;
not now, not now. He just needed a little more time and he would understand, he was
certain of it. He looked and looked at her until it was too much and his eyelids dropped
quickly and forcefully like galloping horse hooves and there was black.

Black like the deep eyes of a bird that pulled him in like a fish on a taut line who
flapped and struggled vainly against the expert strength of the fisherman. Black like the
tilled soil under him, the soil that seemed to be slowly removing itself from the treads in
the soles of his shoes until he floated an inch or so above the ground. Black like the
smooth, sharp obsidian, the hardened magma on the ocean floor, or sliding down the
slopes of volcanoes towards the ocean, cooled by the water, shiny. Black like the rubber
of a moving bicycle tire, and the streaks it left on the white sidewalk from turning
quickly. Black like the coal of the old train engines. Black like the hair and beard of the
conductor, who walked down the car, swinging his flashlight and checking tickets,
humming some old song his grandmother had sung to him when he was still in the cradle.
Black like the wings of the bird that carried Adam upward into the sky towards the one
clear spot in the web of flight patterns. Black like that.

He felt something like the brush of feathers on his cheeks, light like the wind,
light like crawling spiders’ legs. He felt strange, suspended; like he was hanging from
something, like he was far away from the ground. His eyes were still closed; he wanted to stay in the blackness, he wanted to stay floating like he was, deep in the bird map.

She touched his shoulder again. He fell. He was sitting in the dirt, next to the bowl of beans. “Adam,” she said, with subtle empathy in her voice, faint like the ghost notes tapped out on a snare drum, and her fingers tightened around his arm. “It’s getting cold.” Her voice was hardly a whisper. He looked at her. He looked at her and he knew she was right, he knew that it was too cold to stay outside, that he couldn’t do it. He felt her body shiver above him, felt it pass into him like osmosis. He stood up. The woman’s hand left him. The sensation of flight was still in his limbs. He bent over to pick up the bowl of beans. He stuck his hand in the dirt. He let it crawl under his fingernails, he searched for a moment for slugs and worms and small roots. He stood up again. He still felt it; it was still there. He reached a dirty hand into the bowl and put a bean in his mouth, took a bite, heard more than felt the crunch, like it was distant thunder or a gunshot on a movie screen.

His voice was shadows of flying birds on crisp white blinds. “Yes, let’s go inside now.”
MEN SHALL KNOW NOTHING OF THIS

There has always been an element of the infinite that exists in the largest of cities. An element of the infinite that unfolds itself like a long, woolen scarf—the fringe dragging on the swollen floorboards, etching a tangled path across the rings and knots and knowledge of the wood, shaping the ruts and canyons that nearly invisible dust will rush through blindly and quickly like flashfloods, uprooting trees from the dry cracked desert ground—almost imposing in its ability to seem accidental, and sweeps its way down pavement and brick and footsteps, rooftop gardens and sewers belching steam that smells of forests and sweat and anger and motor oil and cartons of oranges. An element of the infinite that smears, like an old pink rubber eraser, the boundaries and crisp distinctions between what once was and what now is.

We see the poplars peeking their heads out of the dirty top-story windows of brownstones and the greasy smoke of all-night restaurants is partially composed of owl pellets and cornhusks; delirious, swooping gnats and the nocturnal wanderings of the bobcat or fox. Step is step is step no matter what the circumstances, and elimination has nothing to do with survival. Hidden under the decorations is evidence—evidence that may seem dubious to those unfamiliar with what they don’t know—that everything, though perhaps its form has changed, is really very nearly the same. This element of the infinite that befuddles and morphs into and around itself with the elegance of a smoke ring blown professionally from a beautiful woman with thick, undulous hair the color of loam and eyes that must use sound instead of light to see, so clear and untouched are they! from so far can she find the breath of a man or the rustle of the turn of the last page in the penultimate novel of a famous Italian author (and in the contemplation in the silence that
fills the moments between looking—knowing it’s fruitless—for one more thought, one more word, until there is the finality of the soft thud of the back cover onto the page where groping fingers had just rested and you feel almost cheated from discovery, though you knew you wouldn’t have found anything, anyway). Ah, if only we were able to discard these morbid thoughts of adaptation! If only we were able to realize the obvious clarity that exists, if only we too could look past the glow of our cigarette and miles of broken highway and signposts and find the elastic wings of a bat as it falls effortlessly up towards home, smoothly flick the ash with our finger onto the floor, that very floor so battered and mutated and carved away by years of sloppy winters and careless garments. Then maybe we too would be certain enough to realize that another scotch will not help to redraw the childish pencil lines once used to distinguish foreground from back, sky from earth, animate from inanimate, reality from the unreal. We would understand what she, she who wears her dress as if it was simply a continuation of her shoulder blades, has been aspirating for hours: that this element of the infinite which we delude ourselves into believing hides only under beds and in the eyes of old, withered widows, is in fact blaring its golden fanfare, a sweet crescendo of black permanent marker on white paper, of smooth, broad strokes made by a practiced hand. If only we knew!

But of course, being who we are, and more importantly, living as we have, we are certain in the fact that the infiniteness of the surroundings is a weakness, and as bricks slide off mortar and nails from out of planks, we will tell ourselves that we are witnessing the end of something grandiose and important, something that will exist only in the deep crevices of our minds, and can be extracted when telling bedtime stories to drowsy grandchildren; but something that is, in front of us like dancers on the stage, turquoise
and red silk scarves, the actual finishing point of tangibility. We will fail to realize, like so many others, that we are actually observers of a metamorphosis, a barely concealed, semi-nude metamorphosis that includes in its development all of what it once had—it is not afraid to display its past—and a metamorphosis that is not afraid of what it is becoming. It is the dirt roads and the factories and the green glass buildings and the flowerpots on sunburnt front porches and traffic jams and the layers and layers of graffiti on old cement. It is a metamorphosis that we see, but one that we do not understand: this metamorphosis of the journey that the beautiful woman has been trying to show us while we ask stupidly for another drink and fumble with our billfold. It is a metamorphosis that has willingly taken a fingernail to the spray-painted wall and scraped hard, a kind of informal grattage scratching at the enamel and leaving a streak of thick, red blood on the rough surface of the wall eager to congeal and stain, and then to move on down the street to find another wall to scrape. And we are drunk on our own inevitability, we reel dizzily around proclaiming the end of something we thought we loved, our lips leap clumsily over invisible hurdles of words as we stare with watery eyes at the ice cubes in the bottom of our Collins glass, astonished that the drink is gone already. We do not understand the long, smooth sentences of the woman as she lights another cigarette and looks through the bar to the night that exists behind it, to the night in which there is always the long moan of the train on the burnished tracks as it leaves its beloved.

Who! cries the owl from his booth in the all-night diner, over a scratched ceramic plate of two eggs with bacon and toast, Who is she? And why does she know so much, why does she understand? And he flaps his wings in a sign of resignation or recognition or maybe just acknowledgement as the gray-haired waitress refills his coffee cup and
moves to the next booth to take the next order, to bring the next plate of eggs with bacon and toast, to pour more coffee, to take more orders, to bring more food, pour more coffee, more food, orders; and as we wipe up the soft, yellow yolk on our plate with our last piece of toast we listen to the inquisitive lamentations of the owl and realize that once we had known the answers to his questions, but now, after years and years of eggs with bacon and toast and cup after cup of coffee refilled by the same gray-haired waitress, the only thing we know how to say is “check please” while we lean back against the booth and wipe our hands on the thin white paper napkin, dropping it on the plate that we push to the center of the table in satiation and satisfaction. The owl looks at us with two grapefruit eyes and says nothing, just sighs and pays his bill, steps outside and heads down the road.

*****

The city gets dark early. Even in the early summer when the sun is lazy to set and chary in its declension, the city is soaked in a murk reminiscent of stagnant river water, and anyone who walks its streets during this hour looks up at the sky through millions and millions of particles of dirt and algae and swims slowly like a catfish in the sinking sediment.

He has irenic thoughts, this illustrative pedestrian, because he momentarily realizes (a realization that will sadly dissipate like the chalked dreams of a five-year-old under torrential rain, once the sun has completely set) that he has walked this street ten thousand times before, and that his steps have defined the city like the thick black line of a coloring book; that though he as how he is now has never been on this street at this time before, he as the illustrative man has traced and retraced the path, darkening and
widening its line. He—he being the illustrative man—and the road are inseparable, in the sense that one cannot exist without the other, that one is unable to flourish or develop without the gentle pull, like that of a guide dog for the blind, of the other. He is it and it is he. Together they blaze the trail of civilization! Together they are the city!

*****

The road starts in the west from a pile of rock and brush, with sunlit traces of rabbit prints and bright flashes of magpie treasures. Rain-smoothed brown fences and the laughing boughs of maple trees edge the road as it moves slowly towards the still-distant city. There is the perpetual sound of tires on gravel, even in the dead part of the afternoon, when there is no one on the road, and sometimes pebbles blow clumsily into the drainage ditch alongside it.

Where the houses start to appear, like mold on sliced bread, the road hardens and the dusty taupe that it was becomes a deep, rolled charcoal like an artist’s pastel and there are smudges and thin, swooping lines of fingerprints left on the paper. It has been identified now, photographed and named and there is a record of its existence, something to refer to in the database—the new white letters on the green sign on the silver post—and something that can be spoken fondly about, even for the times when there was no documented identity. It is like looking at color photographs of great-grandparents sitting weakly in lawn chairs and knowing at one point they were young and vibrantly healthy, even if in that daguerreotype way; that they existed before refinishing was available and eyes and teeth brightened with digital expertise. Road. A Road. We are on a road. A road that has changed in width and form, but whose meaning and purpose has remained throughout decades of travel and wear. We slip and melt into its sticky asphalt on hot
days, we trip and break bones in the swollen pot holes. Body parts are left by necessity and choice and misfortune along its edges. And yet, we go forward.

There is a town now, not so far from the city, and the road broadens itself like wrestlers’ shoulders and grunts ably with the weight of the increased traffic. The houses, the few stores, decorated year-long with white Christmas lights, lean back relaxed and watch the road like old men smoking cigars with arms crossed over their chests. It heaves its great torso upward in a mimic of every gasping breath of every person who has ever inhaled the slightly sour air that hovers constantly over the buildings, its legs bend and stretch and turn with the steps, the repeating steps of those who live and work and eat and die in this town. The road feeds itself on these events, the occurrences of life, it feeds itself and moves onward.

*****

It is the early morning that he likes the best, when most people are still sleeping, still in those stages of rest right before awakening; drowsy, incomprehensible dreams. Perhaps he likes it because it reminds him of when he had been a fisherman, and he would row the catch in daily, using only the light of the lantern on the shore to guide his boat. And then the baskets of fish, unloading them, the scales of the dying fish on his arms and face, any unclothed skin, covering him until he would glint in bright light like ice forming on a puddle. As he dried, he would leave a trail of where he’d been, like a dog marking its territory. And of course the smell, the smell which he never actually minded, the smell which made him remember long winter evenings as a child, sitting near a fire and eating stew out of a wooden bowl, but the smell that stayed with him, and even after he had left that job as a fisherman and had moved to a stove-making factory, where
the pay was better, he had smelled of fish and water and some of the other workers would call him things he didn’t always understand, and he would just smile and offer them part of his lunch, something his wife had made earlier, *boczek* or *kapusta, paczki* on Shrove Tuesday. His wife would fry them right before he left for work, she would make a few extra so he could give them to the other men in the factory, especially the men who spoke Polish and had explained things to him when he was first starting out, “no Jan, it’s like this!” And eventually the fish smell was replaced by that of coal and steel, a smell he did not like at all, a smell that would prick his body like pins when he wasn’t expecting it, that was always lingering dull under everything; and now the other men at the factory welcomed him as much as they welcomed anyone.

*****

From noon to one his shop is closed for lunch. Pulls the blinds down, and locks the door with a heavy key, walks in a darkness like in a thickly wooded forest, deep in summer, to the back of the store where the stairs lead up to the home he shares with his father. Five small rooms: a bedroom each, a kitchen, a dining room, a tiny closet where the toilet is. His father is lying on the davenport with his eyes closed, his head propped on a pillow, his pipe tobacco on the low wooden table next to him, the table on which they stand around, his father and him, almost every other Friday night, and his father recites the Chanukah prayers, *boruch atoh adonoy*, in a low voice like the rustling of pages or the slurred notes of the bass clarinet—summer, winter, fall, spring, for the past two years—then lights the first candle. His father speaks to him in Yiddish now, though both of them grew up speaking English. But Yiddish is a better way to express pain and death, it is the language of pain and death, his father says, and so now, as he enters the
apartment, polished black shoes on brittle wood, his father yells at him in Yiddish “quiet Isaac don’t you know I’m trying to sleep” and he apologizes and takes his shoes off and goes to the kitchen, lights the stove, boils water and takes the vegetables he had bought earlier from Leo, the Italian who runs the fruit and vegetable store next to his shoe repair shop. Leo had asked him, while he weighed his carrots, “hey how’s your pop” and he had said the same thing he always says to Leo, “still lighting the Menorah,” which Leo thinks is hilarious, that his father is always doing that, and on Thursdays Leo will set aside his best potatoes so Isaac can make the latkes for the celebration.

*****

It’s five-thirty and it is raining, so the bus is very full. He has another two hours left before his shift is over, another two hours of door open door closed windshield wiper on and off up and down steps movement until he can switch from driver to passenger and take another bus home. Two more hours.

The smell of rain and street and tired people is strong, and he pushes the window open a little more. Cecil doesn’t mind the water that sprays on his face, the damp gray left arm of his white shirt, he breathes through two nostrils the air of the city, wipes his cheek and temple with his handkerchief, keeps his eyes on the road.

*****

It is only the third time in her entire life that she has dropped a tray, but it is too much, for her and everyone around her, even though she only dropped it coming out of the kitchen door—practically still in the kitchen—back pressed against the door and concentrating on balancing everything, visualizing her movement across the floor to the table, that table of thin-haired women with their gray-suited husbands who were drinking
martinis and enunciating the endings of their words and sentences forcefully. She was concentrating so hard on what would happen she forgot to raise her foot high enough to move from tile to carpet smoothly, and then it was like a hiccup or a Scottish accent, soft, and she felt the acorn squash soup drip down her ribcage as freshwater mussels fell gracelessly to the floor like frightened children jumping into a swimming pool for the first time. The manager and the executive chef had watched her as she scooped the smashed food back onto the tray, balanced it on her shoulder and tried to walk calmly back into the kitchen, broken food back home.

And now in the kitchen—the smell of steam and oil and stress and garlic, where she wishes she could stay, where she belongs anyway, she knows more than any of the line chefs, she just doesn’t have the degree—through the kitchen, not looking at anyone, just eyes on the wall and then through and then there is the door to the alleyway and she is out, she just needs a break, she’ll take her ten-minute break now, needs to, she wouldn’t be able to handle the customers, with their picky suburban tastes and their diamond bracelets, thinking themselves brave to come into the crumbling city for a meal in the only nice restaurant left downtown—two blocks away raccoons and heroin addicts peek big, yellow eyes out from behind burnt out windows half boarded-up, pleading for something different, something better than the rotting pieces of fruit and meat and vegetables dragged over from the restaurant’s dumpsters—thinking themselves superior and tipping her well to show everyone around them that they think no less of their waitress just because she happens to be Mexican. She needs a break and so she walks through the back door and into the alleyway and past the grease and stench and around
the corner of the building, she unties her apron and hangs it from the rusted chain link fence that separates her from the side street.

*****

We are in the city now, we are in the infinite city. The city of wood and cement and metal and brick, the city that spans back from the horizon into the past, the city that is all that it was and then what it is, the city that will persist after the hammers and saws of current and past construction have stopped. But the city that also demands action, the action of the illustrative man and the beautiful woman, and that without it will cease, will become simply pebbles and grass and dirt—a hastily posted sign will designate the area to be important in the scholastic and historical sense, and there will be the occasional tourist or academician, those with obscure interests who’ll decide one day, while bored and sitting at a desk in an office building four hundred miles away, that this poorly preserved ruin could be of some sort of intellectual or economic interest; perhaps there will be some sort of artifact that could be of some value, or perhaps they will stumble upon something that could be linked to their research or their rock collection. And so they’ll go and take some pictures, write down a few things, but nothing substantial will come from it, not even a citation in an unknown academic journal. And the city—or what is left of the city: the pebbles and grass and dirt—remains forgotten in the books of man, now that it has stopped living.

But now, here, in this city, there is no concern of death. There is a slowing of pulse or breathing perhaps, but nothing that requires the kind of scared attention given to the terminally ill. There is movement, there are signs of life. Occasionally there is some symptom that seems to indicate imminent death, and then we must sit anxiously in the
waiting room, hands gripping blue plastic seats like jungle vines, but it always turns out to be nothing, just a false alarm, and life continues. This is the infinite city, remember, and though perhaps outer appearances may hint at decay and decease, it is simply a false betrayal of the flesh, it is reading the city as one would read man. For this is not a body of specific blood and nails and food, it is a body of blood nails food, it is an inverted exoskeleton: the internal parts may be discarded and replaced with no harm to the whole.

*****

When the vegetables are done Isaac takes them out of the water and puts them in a bowl, adds salt and pepper. He goes into the dining room where his father is lying on the davenport and sits on the ground, facing the reclining man. The deep, hard smell of tobacco comes up to him, familiar like colors or dust on the windowsill. He sets the bowl down on the low table between the two of them, near his father’s old pipe and tucks his legs up under his chin so the sunlight that has pushed its way through the thick mauve curtains is focused on his constricted body. He waits for his father to move. Then, “I have food for you. Please eat something.” And there is the “I’m not hungry.” And then, “please eat something.” And he hands his father the bowl of soft vegetables and a fork and his father coughs in annoyance and pain and sits up a little, begins to eat. Isaac watches him for a few seconds and then gets up and walks to the window, pulls the curtains away like a child trying to open a heavy door, lets them fall behind him and stands there, against the window like an emperor or a king, looks down on the street. A girl with her mother, two young boys with brown hats, a man on a bicycle. Pebbles and wheels.

His store is on the main road of the city, a few blocks from the water. If he goes up to the roof, two stories higher, he
can see over the other buildings and to the small, wooden boats rowed by men with woolen caps and thick beards, who speckle the river like drops of saliva; the strong river throat, which takes in deep gulps of merchandise and smoke and fish and exhales them softly somewhere farther down, in some lake or ocean. He likes to watch the water, what happens on the water, he likes how nothing is still, that there is a constant physical motion that propels it and the things on it forever upward, onward, inward. It’s not that he minds the work as a shoe repairman—it’s good work, he knows that, and it’s constant, and he knows he’s lucky to be working in the store, where the men who work in the city, who pass down the road, come to get their shoes fixed and polished, relaced—but sometimes it’s just too much for him, the thread and the leather is just too much for him, and he feels like he’s only fingers and needles, fingers and needles, and nothing more. And then his dreams of feet! His dreams of feet! Always feet, too many feet; and never anything above the knee, just the feet! The feet walking on the road, up and down on the stones of the road, sometimes stopping, twisting, sliding—all the things that feet do, all the feet that he sees. He is disgusted by them, the feet, and the shoes that hide them, by how vulgar they are, how ostentatious and offensive; misshapen toes and cracked leather, soles that rip like lettuce from the shoe. His dreams of feet.

His father is talking to him now, saying words he doesn’t understand. He’s not even sure if they’re Yiddish. He looks at him, looks at the old man his father is, wrapped up in a blanket that his mother crocheted who knows how many years ago; at one point it had been white and green and now it is just gray, just gray gray gray. “Are you finished with your food?” Isaac asks him, and his father sets the bowl on the table. Isaac stands up and takes the bowl, most of the vegetables in it left untouched, like stranded victims of a
shipwreck, to the kitchen. He can hear Leo and his wife through the thin wall. They are speaking in Italian, with that xylophone rhythm that that language has, a xylophone rhythm of long, trilled laughter and wine, not at all like the slow beating dirge of the Yiddish his father loves. “Ma come,” he hears Leo’s wife say, tapping out the high notes carefully with her mallet, he hears the sloppy bass response of Leo. He can’t hear the words, just the tones, and he likes it that way. It keeps him a listener, but not a participant. He had gone over to Leo’s for lunch once, when his father had been well enough that sometimes he could go out with his friends, old like him, at midday and play cards—cribbage or hearts—and eat peanuts near the water. Leo had invited Isaac over, had taken him into his apartment and had stood him there like a painting, and brought his family in to look at him; his wife, two daughters, a young son, appraising him, giving their opinions, critiques, like professionals. It had all been in Italian, and he could only try to guess by the pitch, the rhythm, the gestures, the expressions, how much he had been worth. He still wasn’t sure. He had stayed for lunch, just watched the quick hands, moving as if instead now they were painting, and he simply a stoic Dorian column. They had asked him to come over for dinner another time, and he had meant to, probably, but then his father had gotten sick, had nearly died, really, and now every afternoon and evening was spent on the opposite side of the table, watching his father, glad for the routine and also wishing something would happen.

*****

He walks to the factory every morning, he has to leave early to get there on time. The factory, the smoking mound of hands and metal, is on the other side of the city, on the very edge, and the walk is long. Sometimes men on horses pass him; tall, thick
horses like stone that move with content deliberation, their riders dark and powerful, like how Marcus Aurelius would look. He watches the twitch of the horses’ tails, preparing themselves even this early in the day for the swatting of flies. It is a long walk, it takes more than an hour, but it is not a difficult one, he just follows the main street that goes from his neighborhood of Slavic movements and smells to the neighborhood of regulation and machines. The road is wide, the widest one in the city, certainly wider than any road he had seen before coming here, at least two carriages can pass by one another with plenty of room between them. He walks on the edge of the road that is nearer to the river, so that perhaps in the spaces between the buildings he will see the men dragging in the morning catch, see the thick nets tangled around the bright, squirming bodies, the hoarse shouts as the fish are thrown onto the docks, gathered and moved and brought to the stalls, not knowing, with those unblinking eyes, eyes that he thinks he knows better than even his wife’s or his children’s, that that evening they will be served up in some widow’s basement, or some rich man’s party, flesh constructed into soup or baked or fried or stewed: as food, as sustenance.

The shrill calls of the vendors arranging their wares break through the still morning air like stones through window panes, and Jan recognizes the cries of the produce man, the meat man, the cloth man, the men selling furs and pots and nuts and leather and milk and knives and shoes and anything else he can think of. His wife will be there soon, before the children are up, searching like a magpie through yesterday’s unsold vegetables. A shiny tomato, bright potatoes, silvery onions. Two men carrying a skinned cow cross in front of him, he smells the farm and the knife and the broken veins, the slick muscle, the eyeballs still in their sockets. The men glance at him as they pass, look at his
worn boots and hands, keep walking, moving to their stall. He wants a job like that, a job like those men have, where he can talk and move and breathe and live. He would be happy just cleaning the streets, rinsing away the grass and hair and dirt and grease of the market, sweeping the tobacco smoke and bottle caps of the night into neat piles. Piles of existence, each one containing the refuse that defines a place, a time, a people, the layers of skin and clothes and paint shed simply during the process of living; the human dust. To be able to see and sort and watch those piles as they came and changed! But he walks on, he cannot stop to observe, he has somewhere to be.

*****

Soon the road widens again and there are distinct lanes, two each way, with bold yellow lines and dark asphalt. The height, the jagged edge of the downtown is close enough that the weight and length and industry of the steel can be felt, hanging above and partially shading the sun, creating strange shadows—hypertrophic limbs and spongy, leprous skin—on the dashboards of the moving cars. The white, plastic siding of the houses that line the road like tissue paper are dirty with exhaust, and the yards between them grow smaller and smaller as the heart of the city approaches.

*****

To her left is the water, the river, dying fish and sinking ships; to her right is the road, the main road of the city and where the restaurant sits. Camila remembers walking down here when she was a child with her mother and grandmother, putting on their nicest clothes and taking the city bus from their home on the south side of the city to the downtown, watching the rich people who hadn’t yet left eat and talk and smoke long, thin
cigarettes; and her grandmother clutched her rosary beads in her soft, wrinkled fist every
time she saw a black man (because she thought of fire) and mumbled prayers in Spanish.
She remembers those ladies, with their nicely dyed hair like straight off a painter’s pallet
and their silks and their finery, those ladies that have long since abandoned their salons
and their theaters, and have left their city with the other, poorer parent, who has to work
too many hours to pay much attention to it, never paying child support these ladies, they
have left the city to feed itself, off the scraps and refuse of its sometimes parasitic
inhabitants. It’s better without them, Camila thinks.

*****

The bus route takes him from the south end of the city to the north end,
neighborhood commerce neighborhood, and then back again. It is his favorite route, in
part because it is the simplest, but more because of what it shows him. A straight line
colored red, green, yellow, black and white. It is also one of the busier routes, people
moving inbound, outbound, to homes, offices, lovers, food, baseball, church, water,
banks, bars, homes—and so now, in the cooler air and the rain, it is very crowded, and
people anger quickly and easily, throwing words and shoves as lightly as a bride throws
her bouquet, and he is careful not to stop too abruptly or drive too fast. He smiles at
everyone who boards, tries also to say goodbye to everyone who leaves. It is his job, he
feels, at least in part, to keep people peaceful. He doesn’t want more violence here, there
have been too many fights and riots already, too many people burning things, burning
everything, smoke thick like tar in the sky drowning the clouds.

He wipes the water away again from his face. He sees the brake lights of a car
ahead, and he slows the bus, his foot practiced and regimented from years of pressing the
pedal. The bus stops. Twenty cars ahead there is a red light. Cecil looks out his window. It has started to rain harder, corpulent drops like locust bodies hitting the ground, the flat top of the bus, the bald heads of the buildings, the road, the wide stretches of sidewalk, the people waiting for taxis and buses huddled under awnings and sagging umbrellas. But there’s something about the rain, especially rain like this, that seems to, he thinks, soften the stale and brittle edges of everything, of the city; a rain that in its strength and weight falls upon them all like a sweet glaze on a cake, a white rain that brings clarity—or at least some thin coat of it—even if only for the moments in which it falls. It will stop eventually, as it must, and the glaze will dry and crack and the layers underneath will become hard again, but for now, under the rain, it is just-cooled from the oven, frosted and ready to serve, to be eaten by the thousands people who live in this city and use this road.

*****

In the center of town the cobblestones of the road seem cleaner, smoother, newer, better. He steps purposefully, there are more people out now, more horses, the sky has changed from thick paper to a milky glass that filters the light. The street is wet, and his boots leave faint lines of dirt, like a signature, or fading newsprint. A dog is lying dead in the road in front of him, its eyes open like those of the fish, the cow, the stillborn child that he found one morning in his wife’s rocking arms on the boat over here. Jan’s lips twitch in acknowledgement of things he cannot know and cannot control, and he crosses himself as he walks past the dog.

He hears the throaty call of the train as it leaves the station; it is thick with coal and phlegm. It is bound for some western destination, some far-away place filled with
yellow and red and black and green, he thinks he can hear the call of ocean birds, or the sound of sun hitting stone, strange languages of pictures and song. The train is loaded deep and heavy with goods, Jan wonders if the stoves he makes are on it, if they will one day find themselves boiling exotic and strange-smelling foods, listening to the whispers of a mother to her newborn child, her straight, black hair braided and tied up under her cap. A red-haired man pulling a cart of firewood towards the market stops as he approaches Jan to catch his breath, and they both turn their heads towards the train and watch it as it leaves the city. The red-haired man says, “I want to take one of those trains out of here someday.” Jan smiles at him. “But it is nice here,” he says, his accent thick like the smoke of the train, “and there is work.” The red-haired man starts moving again, starts pulling his cart. “But not the work I want to do,” he says as he passes.

*****

He puts the bowl down on the counter, he’ll take care of it later. He wants to go. It’s only twelve thirty-five. He stands in the kitchen and taps his foot sixty times. And then another sixty. Another. He walks back to where his father is. He seems to be sleeping, his mustache sways with his breathing like boat sails. Isaac walks over to the door and puts his shoes back on, ties them. He opens the door slowly. His father is still sleeping. He leaves the apartment and shuts the door behind him, locks it because his father wants him to and not because he needs to, and at the stairwell instead of going down to the store he goes up, to the roof.

There is bright sunlight and the air is cold, a few brown leaves come to his feet like hungry cats. He walks to the edge of the building and looks down on the street. The same two boys in brown hats are there, standing where the sidewalk hits the road,
laughing at each other and making jokes. The city seems more innocent from up here, with straight lines and right angles, gentle curves and the predictable traffic of pedestrians, cars, carriages, bicycles. The road below him seems more pure, more innocent, more just, when he looks on it as an acorn looks on the ground before falling: like it’s a good place to be. From where he is, if he looks left, to the north, he can see the smokestacks of the factories, the beehive of people, the road leading them there like pollen. To his right there are the neighborhoods, white and black and Jewish and Polish, German, Irish, Italian, where his grandparents first lived before they saved up enough money to buy this store downtown. This store that has stitched and polished and shined and repaired the shoes of ten thousand different men, men who worked on the river and men who cut meat and men who built engines and men who sat behind desks and counted gold coins all day long and men who swept streets and men who rode horses and men who just thought and men who did all the things that a city needed done; men who walked to this main road of this city to this store to get their shoes fixed. And he, and his father, and his grandfather, had seen them all. It makes him feel kind of important, to think that.

*****

The road is at the inner edge of downtown, peeling back buildings like the scales of a pine cone, and still it heads eastward into the sun. There are fat apartments now, crowded and shoving each other off their foundations, always fighting, bickering. Traffic is constant but not too heavy; it avoids potholes nimbly and is quick like the darting hands of street chess players; and the other men, those who watch and wait for their turns nod their heads with approval or admiration for the move. The road continues straight.

*****
A woman comes up to the front of the bus. Her hair is blond and bobbed and a clear plastic rain bonnet is tied neatly under her chin. She has a small shopping bag under her arm.

“Excuse me,” she says, looking forward through the glass of the windshield. He looks up at her. “Will you let me off here, we’ve been stuck in traffic for hours. So I’ll just get off here and wait in drugstore until my husband gets home from work so I can call him to come get me.” Her voice is crisp like a carrot or potato chips, a saltine. He should tell her that he can’t do that, that it’s only been ten minutes, anyway, that she’ll have to wait for the next stop, but the rain clouds his words and his thoughts and he obliges.

She looks at him like he’s a child who’s behaved well as he opens the door. “Have a nice day, ma’am,” he says.

He watches her as she walks around a puddle and into the drugstore. A man holding a newspaper over his head sees the bus door closing and runs over to it, he knocks on the glass with his knuckles. But now traffic is starting again and Cecil shakes his head slowly at the man outside, no sir, sorry sir, he nods his head forward towards the stop ahead up the road, and the bus begins to move. The man with the newspaper is wet and chases after it, and when the he pulls the bus over at the next stop Cecil looks in the side view mirror to see if the man is still running. He is. He is near. The exchange of passengers begins then, with a few leaving, heading nervously down the steps outside, eying the puddles, and many entering, bringing the rain and dirt and street with them. The man with the newspaper is the last to board. He doesn’t look happy. Cecil smiles at him. “I’m sorry about that back there,” he says as the man feels in his pocket for a coin.
“Traffic was starting again, and we’re already moving slow, and I just needed to get to this next stop. I was going to wait for you here, anyway.” The man does not smile back at him.

“How come you let that woman off?” he says. Cecil sees his dry, stale eyes.

“I shouldn’t’ve done that sir, you’re right,” he says evenly. “But now you’re in, you’ll be home soon. Why don’t you have this ride for free?” The man looks at Cecil for a moment, he puts the coin back in his pocket.

“Do you have a place where I can put this?” he says, handing him the wet newspaper.

“Of course, sir.” He takes the paper and sets it on the floor next to him. It leaves black print on his hands. The man steps fully into the bus and Cecil shuts the door behind him, like a parenthesis. White cotton legs move away from the stained black hands of the driver, into the bowels of the bus, where he stands beside two other white cotton men, they look at each other and shake their heads.

*****

She turns right, and goes towards the main road, steps over fifteen-year-old potholes until she reaches the worn bit of sidewalk where she remembers that one day, walking home from high school instead of taking the bus, she had seen a woman in clothes like a molting exotic bird standing, waving her hands in a kind of pantomime that mocked the dependency of man on systematic planning and rationale. “Jesus is coming!” she had sung. She had been shaking a tambourine, she thinks. Singing of hell and inevitability. The woman had been moving her arms in cryptic messages that maybe could’ve saved the world if anyone had understood them, but now they are forgotten and
Camila stands there on the corner, toes in the street, and looks left and south towards her parents’ home, can hear the muted trumpet of Spanish float like cottonwood seeds in the air, and she wants to leave, leave right then, turn right and follow this fading road out of town, out of state, away, away from all of this that is what she must call hers simply because it is the only thing she’s ever had. The city, being in the city and knowing the city and living in the city as much as the city does all of that in her; she feels its dirt billow up in her lungs and she coughs, and the ground shakes under her. Ah an escape! But to where? Because any place where she would go, where she either finds herself or makes a conscious effort to end up would never love her, in all its pain and crumbling facades, as this city, her city, loves her. It was like the thoughtless lover you never wanted to keep but could never actually, when it came down to straight lines and scotch tape, get rid of; you thrived when he was around, and you wanted him to be near even if sometimes he forgot that you were there. Maybe it was better she stayed here, in her parents’ house, the same small bedroom she’d had since she was four or five, whenever it was they had moved there. Her father had been promoted at his job, and her parents wanted their children to have a nicer home, maybe even a small backyard, something better than the tobacco-stained cinderblock apartment, shaped like a horseshoe, where the six of them had been living. And people were moving out of town faster than anyone wanted to move in, so property was cheap, and they bought a small house on the south side of town, where the blue-collar white factory workers used to live, a nice enough neighborhood then, with clean, straight fences between the houses, a few parks scattered around like the spots on a dog’s back. A small gray ranch with its own cement stoop filled with thick cracks that she used to trace her fingers along on hot summer nights,
when the bugs would descend down on her like a fog. Camila would lay flat across the cool stoop hoping the mosquitoes wouldn’t see her, wouldn’t smell her bright red blood, lay in the damp shadow of the house and listen to the traffic—french fries and electric guitars and laughter like slot machines—that moved languidly down the busy main road a few blocks away from where she was. She would listen to the road and wonder how long it was, wonder what the end of the other side looked like, if it was as poor and homogenous as her side had become. Everyone who lived near her was Mexican, most worked in the same factory her father worked in, most sent money back to relatives in Mexico even though they hardly had enough to buy rice and tortillas and vegetables and peanut butter for themselves every week. She would lay on the stoop and feel the heat swim around her until she started to fall asleep, and then her mother would open the front door and tell her to come inside, give her a glass of cold water and rub calamine lotion on her mosquito bites and she would go to bed thinking of deep fissures that cracked the earth, the city, in two.

*****

And then suddenly, before it is too late, the road turns sharply right, south, into downtown, into the very center of the city. But it is only the center of the city because the road has made it so, for it is the existence and location of the road around which everything else defines itself. It turns right and now the cars go north and south, because the road commands them to do so. The road is west of the river, and travels with it like a young woman with her grandfather’s wheelchair, pushing it forward, always. The river may have been here first, geographically, but the road has existed since the first atoms of
the earth leapt and danced towards one another: the road was the entropy that brought
everything together and started creation.

*****

And now she is standing on the corner of that same road, in the center of the city,
looking left and right. Her hands still smell like butter and garlic and seafood. The city
is quiet, even though it is Friday. An old, brown car, a Chevy, one headlight out, drives
past and turns onto a street that will lead it towards the water. She looks towards the
restaurant, to her right. It is bright and clear like honey, she sees a couple walk to the
entrance, her arm in his, and he opens the door for her and smiles, says something, and
she slips like a mink past him and into the building. It is late and she doesn’t think there
will be many more customers after them. They look like they might tip well, maybe she
should go back inside now, wash her hands and apologize to the manager, he won’t be
that angry, he knows she works hard, that the customers like her. Maybe she should go
back inside and do her job now, her ten minutes are up, but her feet feel sticky and she’s
not sure if she should, or can, move from this spot on the road. Another car passes, a red
Pinto, it looks new. It is heading north, she watches its taillights as it moves away.
Camila pulls her feet away from the place she’s been standing and turns around, and
walks slowly back to the restaurant.

*****

He is near the factory now, and the defined pattern of the cobblestone of the
downtown becomes replaced with dirt packed hard from a million feet and a million
wheels. The road is lined with factories, and it is noisy, there is the sound of engines
starting and men yelling. Perhaps these are the sounds of progress, the sounds of industry
and money and work. A song he heard his children singing is in his head now, just the melody, because he did not understand the words, but it is something clear, clear like the sky above him, which has wiped away the grime and dust of the night with a clean cloth and now walks sleepy-eyed to the breakfast table. The tune is simple and repetitive, he sings it to himself as he walks. The road is crowded now with men like himself coming to work. They wear the black and gray of the factory, the black and gray that never wash out of clothes or hair or fingernails. He wonders if he looks like they do, like they all do; black and gray like that.

The factory bells ring. It is time for the day to start. He is not quite ready, he is not quite there yet. If he doesn’t run the last few blocks he’ll be late. And so he runs. Boots scuff and press down on the road. Jan runs.

*****

He pulls his watch out of his pocket. It is five minutes to one. He should go back downstairs, unlock the door, sit on his wooden stool and work. He needs to think, he needs to talk to Leo, he needs to sew. His hands are numb from the breeze that comes over the building like a giant feather duster and shakes him, fluffs him. He wonders if it will be a cold winter this year, cold enough to freeze the river over completely, so on clear Sundays whole families will go out onto the ice, sliding happily in their good shoes. Business will be good if there is ice, he thinks. He puts his watch back in his pocket, he tucks in his shirt. Somewhere a church bell announces the hour. It sounds like French. He climbs back down the stairs to the shop and pulls open the blinds. The two boys are still there, they move down the road when they see him looking at them. He unlocks the
door and opens it, thinks about opera or the ripe colors of Renaissance cathedrals. Leo calls out to him from inside his store, “Hey, how was lunch?”

Isaac smiles. “Eh, you know my father,” he says.

“Come over when the sewing is slow,” Leo says. “I got some great potatoes today.” He laughs.

“Yeah, see you,” Isaac says, and walks back into his shop.

*****

Traffic has cleared some, and the rain is not falling as hard now, and the bus moves along the road, staying in the far right lane, stopping and changing people for other people, open umbrellas for small silver coins. The bus passes the department store and playhouse, the fire station, the movie theater and the grocery, the barbershop and the newspaper stand, the bakery, the hardware store and the park near the river where his children used to play, it passes from one side of town to the other, and back again, people on and off and so many steps. So many steps. The sun low and heavy, like a boat pulling into the dock laden with fish, and the slow rain refracts the light like off a hundred thousand sparkling scales. It nearly seven-thirty, it is nearly time to stop his bus and take a different one home, and there is something extremely sad about it all, about the descent of light and how, nestled among the buildings like duck eggs in the grass, he feels so far away, and so lonely. He hears the growl of John Lee Hooker in the glow of the puddles on the street, the grayness that is coming over them all.

You know it was that Wednesday evening, when the sun was sinking low, my baby don’t know how she hurt me, she made me feel so bad.
Cecil pulls the bus over, it is time to go home. There is another driver at the stop waiting to take over. They nod to each other as he pulls himself out of his seat, his sleeve still damp. He picks up the wet newspaper from the floor and folds it in half, brings it out of the bus with him, places it gently in the garbage can near the bench, where the passengers sit and move and change and switch and step. The bus that will take him home will stop here, and he stands a few feet away from the other people waiting in places where the rain will not hit them. It is only a mist now, anyway, the worst is over. John Lee Hooker comes back to him, the easy push of the strings, the scrape of old, brown fingers on smooth steel, the slide and pull, tapping the fingers on the guitar, in somebody’s basement, melted ice in a mason jar of scotch.

*I was beggin my baby, lord I just couldn’t keep on trying, I was beggin my baby, lord baby please don’t go.*

*****

Through the steep, narrow crevices in between skyscrapers and the deep caverns that divide the broken mountains of decaying buildings the road goes, dipping low in the swamps of thick sewer mud and following the curve and the incline of the steam and the fog that rise from the heat of shoes and tires, enough friction to melt glaciers and flood coastlines and destroy all things left unanchored. The road is polite yet demanding in its presence, it requires an attention that though perhaps cannot be defined as constant, must be at least considered continuous, even if only in the subconscious, beyond dreams and acute sensations. It is an attention that expects a devotion like one we would give to a
beautiful, distant woman, whom we rarely see but always think about. A kind of infinite attention that compels us, like the pull of a magnet, to acknowledge it, and to understand it. To slip our hands under the layers of asphalt and sod, and to defend it.
Acknowledgements

Thanks are in store, as they are for most things, except that now I have a platform (albeit small and not particularly sturdy) on which to give them. So, I should take advantage of it:

To my friends, family, peers, professors—in short, anyone who listened to my bad jokes and my ideas and my complaints and supported me in spite of them. Thank you.

To the authors to whose images I feel obligated to mentally apply a kind of gold, shimmering halo, like in medieval paintings. I have much more to learn. Thank you.

To music in general. And to live shows. And to Nina Simone, John Lee Hooker, Carmen Consoli, Shuggy Otis, Prince, Robert Randolph, Beth Orton, for what they’ve done. Thank you.

To Professor O’Har, for his patience and open-mindedness, and his overall good advice. Thank you.