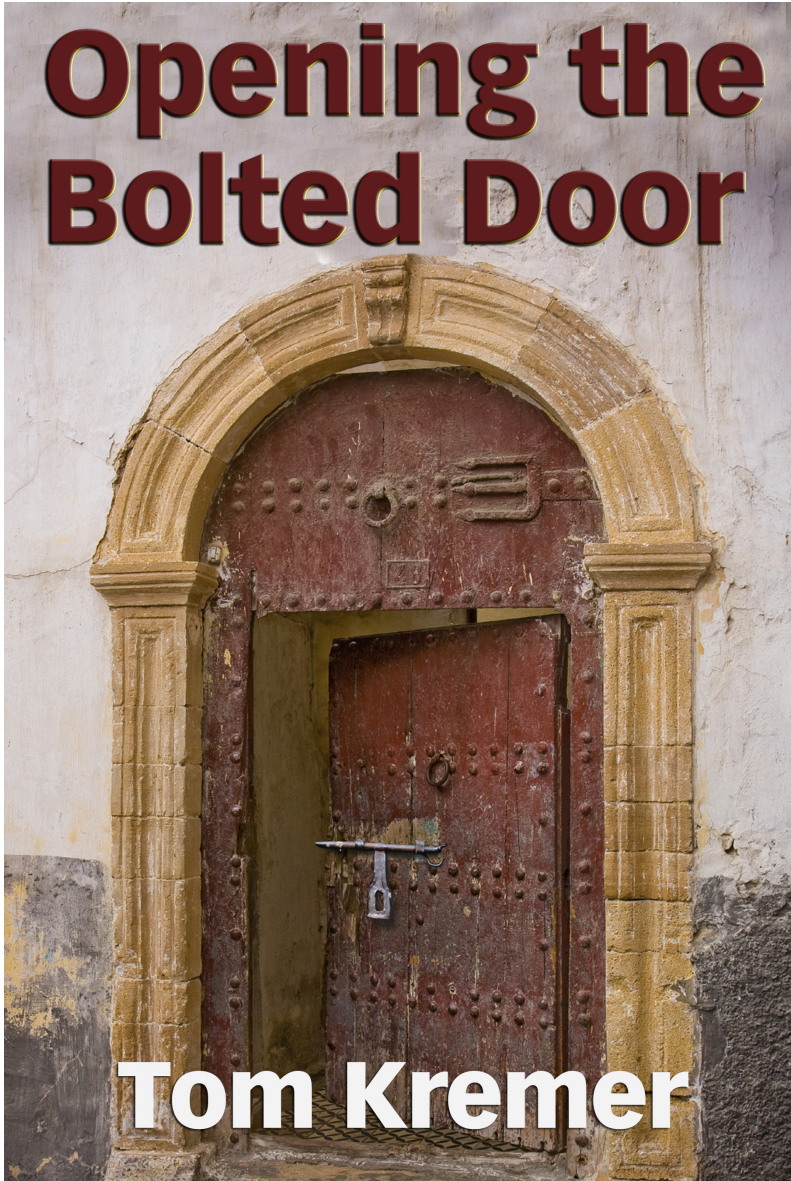


Opening the Bolted Door

Tom Kremer



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CHAPTER I

AN END

The heavy bolts slide back with surprising ease. The door turns without creaking. It swings smoothly open on red-rusted hinges contrary to all expectation. And yet it has not moved for at least two generations.

It is dark, as expected, but the light of a single candle defines the night. It is held by a white bearded old man propped up on the pillow of a Victorian bed.

His wife, children and assorted relations are ranged at a respectful distance all round him in a sombre, waiting and silent family picture. Silent because they have nothing to say. Waiting because the old man is about to take his final leave. Sombre because the occasion and good manners demand it.

The face of the dying man betrays no fear. True his eyes are moist as befits eyes that see everything for the last time, but there is a faint, knowing smile on his lips, the smile of someone who has been vouchsafed confidential information reserved for the very few.

The scene is self-contained, there is no room for us in it.

Let us move on.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN CONDEMNED

We go down some steps to the prison cell of a young man condemned to die. The execution is fixed with cruel precision as to form, time and place.

All appeals for delay are exhausted, the man knows there can be no reprieve.

The time left is short, yet it still has to be filled with something other than the obsessive images of his own end.

I expect the man to pace out the confines of his cage in frantic circles of anguish amidst shrieks of laughter and despair.

Instead the man is defiant. In a chilling voice of reasoned calm he states that he is already dead. Was dead ever since he committed the capital crime for which he is to suffer the ultimate and logical consequence.

Whereas I, he explains, who have not indulged in doing a significant wrong, have my own death determined with equal precision. Its manner, time and place writ with indelible ink in the library of human congress.

The only difference between us is my own ignorance.

To demonstrate his argument, the condemned man opens the door of his cell and leads us through a maze of prison corridors to an institution no one ever told me existed.

CHAPTER III

THE LIBRARY OF HUMAN CONGRESS

The library has no books to speak of. No classics, romances, thrillers, no philosophical works, no travel guides, art histories or carpentry manuals and absolutely no fiction of any kind.

It is simply a Records Office of Births and Deaths, with one crucial difference. The records are only of those still alive. Ranged in neat alphabetical order each name has against it two relevant dates. The date of birth and the date of death.

The date of birth is followed by the names of mother and father, its instrument.

The date of death is preceded by a brief description of its cause and circumstance.

The librarian, or more correctly, the custodian is, to all appearances, friendly, informal and only too anxious to assist.

There are, it seems, no restrictions on revealing information so long as it relates to the enquirer himself. Anyone, anyone at all may simply walk in, present some proof of identity and foresee when and how he will die.

Yet to the custodian's sad disappointment there are virtually no enquiries. He cannot for his life see why.

After all it would be so useful for a man to know the amount of life he is left. However much or little, it could be employed to greater purpose if quantified. To set affairs in order, to accomplish objectives set, or set fewer and more modest ones, to savour each experience, each occasion, each event, each idea, each memory, each moment, counting how few are left.

Would it not be a relief to be certain of a sudden, painless departure, if such an end was indeed decreed.

And, on the other hand, if the end is to be undignified, drawn out in suffering, steeped in violence, the window of opportunity to ready oneself for it, would be sharply defined.

That's just it, there are nowadays so few men well prepared and ready to die. There is always one more thing to do, or see or acquire. A daughter to marry, a deal to clinch, a book to publish, a rare shrub to come into flower, an excursion to dreamland, the deciphering of a lifelong puzzle, yet another, and quite different woman to please. As

if the fulfilment of a desire could have anything to do with getting ready to face one's own demise.

The custodian sighs. His discourse takes a sudden personal turn. He asks, ever so politely, for my name.

I refuse to give it. I refuse to contemplate how, where and when I am going to die.

Why? On account that I do not yet believe, in my heart, that I must die. On account that even if it turns out that I am mortal, I do not as yet understand what it means to die. On account that I am not sure I could continue to live, with my own end so definitely and continuously in sight. On account of being terrified of what I may be forced to foresee.

The custodian is not impressed. He smiles vaguely in a general direction and expresses a wish, indeed a hope, to see me again.

In the meanwhile he most earnestly recommends I spend more time in preparing myself for our next encounter.

Preparing, he insists, means rehearsals. Rehearsals are of course not the real thing but in his opinion they are essential for a successful final performance.

CHAPTER IV

VISITORS AT NIGHT

Thereupon I am cast into darkness.

The darkness of children, where all things are hidden and waiting to happen so ferociously fast that there is no interval between sound and touch.

Deprived of night vision I am prey to creatures who move, hunt and feed in the dark. Blind and helpless, will I be eaten alive? Eaten alive, as is rumoured, by a species of silent rodents who glide swiftly in the substance of the night, their horrendous presence first announced by the tearing of flesh.

A faint rustle. Scratching. No, more like rubbing. Ever so soft. Soft as the breathing of an infant about to fall asleep. A sound too doubtful to last. A glimmer. A trace of movement. Whites. The whites of eyes? or teeth? Rows of sharp greedy, little teeth longing to sink themselves into milk-fed tender flesh laid out on a cot of nightmares for a silent, midnight feast.

My eyes strain into the black hollow trying to outline a moving body and reassure themselves at the same time that nothing really is out there.

Betrayed by ears and eyes, I lie uneasy in the gaping dark until quite suddenly the hair on my skin is brushed by a something that's alive.

I do not scream, or move a hand to defend myself or leap out of bed. I have no voice, no muscle left, all of me is paralysed with the exception of a beating, frenzied heart.

And then suddenly there is light and blessed relief as the features of the room assemble themselves into their familiar, reassuring form. The room is the one that has greeted my awakening eyes a thousand times and more, striving to demonstrate each time, in the clear morning light, the proof of its innocence.

'You see there is nothing to be afraid of here' a hollow echo of an adult voice quotes from the dim and distant past. 'And besides nowadays nobody is eaten alive'.

CHAPTER V

AMPUTATION

In the annals of largely unread literature there is a comprehensive work on the various forms of dying, listing them in order of severity from the mercifully quick and easy to the painfully prolonged and gruesome.

In its systematic index “being eaten alive” falls neatly within the category of “death by gradual mutilation”. The category is succinctly defined as the progressive removal of body parts whilst the owner of that body remains fully conscious of his own diminishing physical extent.

Paging gently through the book’s heavy, yellowing pages I come across a series of fine woodcuts. Fine illustrations of the common mediaeval punishment for treason. Arms, legs, genitals cut off, disembowelment with eyes alive only to the blood soaked, slimy guts spilling out right in front of them.

And when I lift my own eyes from the book I see the one-legged beggar standing on crutches right beside me, large as life. Yet I thought we had left him behind, all those many years ago when I was dragged away from his stump, leaving him behind without a limb, a penny and any kind of explanation.

The hand that dragged me away was my mother’s right hand, a hand which had but four fingers. The middle finger, I was told much later, had to be removed after an accident. It was poisoned by the point of a nib dripping black ink. At school. Writing.

I do not wish to dwell on the strange little pimple, marking its sad absence in between the remaining four fingers. I don’t wish to make much of the embarrassed air of mystery that always drew unwelcome attention to the empty spot.

But I was never any good at confining myself to the particular. Obsessed with the significance of the universal, I could not very well prevent the amputation of a single finger bleeding itself into a host of other mutilations. A death by a thousand cuts.

Given a sharp knife and any kind of body, there is no restraint to my zealous speculation of all the academic, and practical, possibilities.

I close this dismal catalogue of all possible endings. It is too abstract a guide for such an intimate, personal pilgrimage.

CHAPTER VI

HOSPITAL

A clinical corridor leads the whitewashed way to a hospital for the terminally ill.

Some of the patients await their fate lying prone in regulation beds, their progress publicly monitored on feverish charts hanging neatly in a row. Others are perambulated up and down avenues of illusion, sitting in sweetly gliding wheelchairs whilst their bodies come slowly to a standstill as the creeping paralysis ossifies limb, flesh, sinew and skin.

These men, cooped up in their mobile cages, are highly vocal. The plaintive quality of their narration and their submissive presence have the power to detain all those trying to walk by upright on two healthy legs.

Thus I have to attend the minuscule detail of daily losses of power, function, use and sensation in bodies until so very recently akin to mine.

Some of their tales are about heroic resistance. Like, for example, gripping a spoon with one trembling finger and supping all alone, unaided. But mostly they are painstaking accounts of self observed lives slowly ebbing away.

Out of nowhere a wheel-chair is produced and I am invited to take a seat. It seems impolite to refuse. Churlish not to share a little of the infinite suffering allotted to each dying man.

At the same time there is an obvious danger in accepting the hospitality of such a dedicated lot of self-mourners.

One could so easily, sitting in a wheel-chair, come to feel pins and needles in some extremity and imperceptibly graduate from a complete stranger to a valued guest, then a temporary lodger and finish up by being a confirmed member of the fatal community.

I stand at a loss beside the empty wheel-chair. A bespectacled young man in a medical uniform approaches me in confidential tones.

“You have no idea what trouble they are. You’d think they would collaborate and pass quietly away. You’d expect them to show some consideration and make way for all those waiting outside to take their place. Not a bit of it. Each single one of them clings on to dear miserable life with the unhealthy desperation of the truly sick. Each one makes his own inimitable, irritating little fuss.

This old boy here, with an outsize volume on his lap is determined to memorise the entire Greek dictionary before his failing eyesight deserts him for good.

That one, over there, with the chess set and the calendar counts every blessed day the diminishing number of opening variations he still remembers from the entire gamut of his grandmaster days.

And the one propelling himself madly with a stop-watch swinging on his neck, sets himself ever retreating targets and struggles grimly to beat his own desperate aim.

It is always the same, a ridiculous race against time with a result that does not matter in the least.”

Thus speaks the good doctor whereupon a parrot of monumental proportions, clad in an array of greys, settles on his head and delivers the following recital, in shrill monotone.

“Results always matter. Results always matter. Change the game, alter the venue, make new rules, cut back the opposition, cheat a little but get a result, always get a result. To win is good, to lose is bad but never, ever draw.”

So the bird. Since I dare not walk away on my still sturdy legs and leave behind such cripples to haunt in their disabled legions the twilight of my life, I find myself crawling away on all fours.

CHAPTER VII

CITY OF GIANTS

I am crawling naked in a city of giants. Unable to stand up, without clothes to cover my shame, I am defenceless.

Daytime the sun drenched pavement burns my hands and knees.

Night time the freezing air penetrates the pores of my bluish skin to shiver the delicate bones.

Restricted in movement and bereft of cover, my senses are now inhumanly acute. I see eagle-eyed, I hear with dolphin ears, I outscout bloodhounds, I outtaste the entire animal kingdom in all the degrees of fear.

Towering above me giants skip and jump, wrestle, and generally prance about parading their acquired skills. A thundering army of leather boots threatens to crush the life out of my puny frame. The giants are busily unaware of me.

An elemental scream issues from somewhere in the region of my throat. A giant bends down, picks me up, rocks me violently to and fro. Then hands me over to another who tosses me high into the air and laughing catches me again. A third pokes his huge finger into my stomach and tickles the soles of my feet. A fourth, or perhaps the first again, stuffs a biscuit into my mouth before all the giants suddenly disappear.

I am all alone. Alone that is, but for the cruel afterglow of warmth, comfort and replete somnolence, now receding far way.

Once abandoned I have no way of knowing if I will be warm, comforted, replete ever again.

The scream from deep within me is now overwhelming. Then the strength of the voice drains. The piercing call for help subsides into a continuous, pathetic wail. All that is left to fill the vast emptiness around is the soft drumming of a tired heart.

And when this last vestige of life is just about to die away, I have a vision in the far off distance of a soft mountain with the fountain of life at its tip. With the vision of warm, gushing milk I fall asleep to wake elsewhere, at another time, never knowing for sure what was for real and what was not. Was it the vision that saved my life ? Or was the vision itself a glimpse of another life to come, and repeat itself?

CHAPTER VIII

THE HALL OF CLOCKS

At any rate, I am now an old man once more, still erect and not without hope, looking wary eyed across the Hall of Clocks.

A rich diversity of inventions are here on display, each one unique in style and mechanical construction, yet all concerned with the unattainable feat of measuring time accurately.

In actual fact no two clocks move at the same speed.

Oscillating penduli, heavy cylindrical weights hanging by solid chains, cogwheels and gears of almost all descriptions, austere and garishly decorated faces, big hands, small hands, numbers, a multitude of numbers, all vie with each other to attract the visitor's attention.

To add an element of spectator interest special sections have been cordoned off as live demonstration of the interaction between clock and man.

In one of them a row of men are seated at a long table counting, sorting and boxing coins. An impressive grandfather clock sits at the head of the table. At its foot stands an execution block complete with black handed axe and matching hood.

The clock chimes every hour. As many chimes as there are hours. Each man must finish as many boxes within the hour as there are chimes.

The clock moves at a disquieting pace. It is not especially fast but the rate is irregular. It gathers speed as the hours mount as if its momentum was proportional to the number of chimes. The greater the number, the faster moves the time.

Governed by this clock the men work in pre-ordained cycles. Leisurely in the small hours, seriously in the middle and with increasing frenzy as the dreaded hour of twelve approaches, because twelve boxes will have to be ready in what always appears the twinkling of an eye.

The executioner's axe bears no tell-tale trace of a rusty brown colour and no executioner is present, but quite often, approaching twelve, one of the men, haggard, hollow cheeked, with shaking hands and a nervous twitch, slumps unto the table - dead.

The body is removed and the vacancy filled at once by a visitor picked at random, without fuss.

In another section, disposed in a circle round a clock-tower of great artistic merit, a group of men are absorbed in waiting. Waiting for the clock to strike the hour, any hour, for at such times, and only then there is a happening.

The fancy doors set in the richly decorated clockface are flung wide open to let through a splendid figure who appears each time in a different guise. Whether king or beggar, bishop, artisan, merchant, monk or knight, he invariably showers the waiting men with priceless gifts of acknowledged quality.

Golden apples, jewelled daggers, falling stars, plates of the finest china, performing monkeys, hunting dogs, sparkling wines, crowns for heads of all sizes, silver buttons for meaningless uniforms, come tumbling forth and are bestowed with ease. The gifts are real enough, but upon receipt, at the first human touch, each one disappears without trace, leaving the waiting men still waiting. Waiting for the next event.

And so it goes on, hour after hour, exactly as before, except that the clock appears to slow and keep slowing imperceptibly by the passing of each hour. Thus, the men feel forced to fill the increasing emptiness of time, between the happenings, with something else.

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the place, beside the clock and the waiting men. And having waited all their lives there is sadly nothing in the men themselves to alleviate the tedious, funereal march of time.

So they yawn and stretch and scratch all over, shift frequently from leg to leg, jump up and down, contort their bodies in gymnastic exercise and lie down in search of a sleep which is perforce shallow, troubled and brief. For no happening can be allowed to pass unnoticed. No happening is to be missed.

From time to time, one of the waiting men does fall into a deep sleep, only never to wake up again. Permanently asleep, he is carted off by the attendants. Another man is always waiting to take his place.

In a distant corner, discretely hidden from public view, an ancient clock, all iron, of a simple construction and devoid of decoration, keeps a measured, even time. This singular clock never strikes, never chimes.

Around it a band of aged men are working quietly, rhythmically, at a steady pace. Largely obstructed from view I cannot see their faces or the object of their work, but their backs are bent, their heads always turned away from the clock and they seem altogether unaware of the passing of the time.

I try to come closer but my way is barred.

Entry is here highly selective, restricted to those who passed a certain examination, the details of which are, as a matter of principle, never published.

Therefore rumours circulate. It is whispered, for example, that the examination has something to do with confrontation. A confrontation to the bitter end.

CHAPTER IX

THE AMPHITHEATRE OF DUELS

Riding such an insubstantial piece of hearsay I am despatched to a duel, always dreaded, always destined, long in coming. A confrontation I spent a lifetime vainly to avoid.

The Amphitheatre of Duels is almost full to capacity with raucous crowds of sophisticated primitives. To entertain them the spectacle has to be explicit and surprisingly ingenious in the subtlety of its cruelties. Impending participants are given some say in the choice of weapons but not opponents.

To give me the benefit of some foreknowledge, and the chance to study my options, I am invited to follow the proceedings from the seat of honour.

In the first duel, the two combatants confront each other centre-stage, across a large leering lady lying with legs thrust menacingly open, naked on the altar of lecherous design. The warriors kneel between those challenging legs in ritual homage and undress in turn. Naked and erect, their manhood is measured with accuracy and ceremonial aplomb. A steel ruler for length, callipers for thickness, weighted scales suspended from the tip, to test rigidity. Each individual result, announced on loudspeakers, is accompanied by the roars and jeers of the overexcited fans.

All this is preliminary but it still counts. The men take turns to mount and pump, each one three separate times. Their efforts are measured in sound decibels of screams emanating from the lady's palpitating throat during the carnal intercourse.

The crowd are now on their feet cheering their heroes with lewd obscenities too shameful to record.

The final score is calculated by an arcane method, probably most unfair. At any rate the winner takes the plaudits and the demanding lady whilst the loser has his prick cut off.

The second duel takes place on the rim of a monstrously huge jar of honey. The jar is of pure glass, the honey is a light golden, softly flowing liquid, offering the avid spectators a transparent sight of the entire fiendish construct.

Naked to the waist, the duellists circle each other on a rim which is too narrow to allow either of them to turn round. The object of this childish pursuit is to reach the

opponent, shove him in the back and topple him into the jar. What makes the pursuit spectacular are the swarms of bees adhering to the queens securely tied to the hair of the circling men. All we can see are two living hives moving precariously along the slippery rim.

The bees do not sting. Do not sting so long as none of them are accidentally squashed or disturbed by a sudden, unexpected move. With crawling insects all over arms, face, mouth, eyes, each step is precarious. Yet each step must be firm, smooth, fast. Any slip, a slight wobble, even an ill considered lunge to recover balance, is likely to prove fatal.

The amphitheatre is gripped by the ominous silence of a thousand bated breaths willing to erupt into one huge, ugly communal roar.

The duellists seldom reach one another. Before the pursuit abuts, one of them, stung a hundredfold, blinded, plunges into the honey. Struggles manfully and long against the treacherous substance. Exhausted, sinks beneath the surface. Suspended in honey, his grotesque figure remains still and clearly visible from every single point of view.

The winner, in the meanwhile, takes home the public adulation and all the sweetness of an untroubled life.

In the third duel, the protagonists do not set eyes on each other. Standing on the outer edge of a small circular platform of a gothic tower, diametrically opposed, they look down on a mosaic stone pavement far, far below. With large, finely feathered wings attached to arms held fast together at the back, the duellists have the semblance of birds set to fly.

At the very tip of the tower a giant egg-timer is set into motion. All eyes, except those of the birdmen, are fixed on the moving sand. Yet the only two men who cannot see the timer are the ones affected by the ebbing of time. For they know that once the sands have run out their pinioned arms cannot come apart. They are also painfully aware just how fatally their two lives are intertwined. The one who jumps first sets free the wings of his opponent, whilst his own remain firmly locked. It is therefore for each man a simple matter of judging the moment to take off.

Duellists are given ample opportunity to practice. They acquire an uncanny sense of passing time. Thus it virtually never happens for both of them to be too late. Invariably, despite all the practice, one birdman, in the severity of the duel, dives a fraction too early. He plummets head first unto the stone pavement and lies there, a grossly mangled figure in full public view.

His fortunate antagonist, wings majestically wide, soars over the amazed, envious multitude, to fly high, easy and victorious for all the days of his life.

The choice of weapon for the fourth duel is inhuman. The parties fight each other, quite naked, with antlers affixed to their heads on cunningly sculpted masks of noble

stags. In keeping with the theme and to enhance the dramatic quality, both hands and feet are encased in leather hoofs contrived so that the men can neither stand, nor walk nor fight effectively with their fists. The points of the antlers, on the contrary, are razor sharp, designed to cut into the flesh deep enough to draw blood but not so deep as to prematurely kill.

Down on all fours the human stags charge head first. Antlers locked, each one tries to lift and turn his rival by main force. Evenly matched, both still fresh and strong, at first there is but a rattling clash of heads and some fierce shoving to and fro. These preliminaries, indecisive as they are, serve to weaken the fighters. They also serve to assess relative strengths, and permit time to set odds and lay bets.

Eventually tiredness sets in. Neck muscles sag, making it possible to get past a cumbersome head, to attack the unprotected flesh. The colour of blood presents itself in thin, clean drawn lines, which turns ragged running ribbons, as the two bodies are being flayed alive.

Even so it takes a long time for one of them to collapse on his skinless back and offer up a soft underbelly for the final kill.

The still standing, bloodied half stag half man is led staggering away, garlanded, to be worshipped as a god. The carcass on the reddened ground is left a meal to a pack of ravenous dogs.

Sometime into these excitements I am called upon to urinate. Since one duel succeeds another without formal intermissions there seems no convenient moment to vacate my seat of honour and slip unnoticed away. Nevertheless, as the fifth duel gets under way, under the regard of a disapproving populace I retire to seek private relief.

The public lavatory is, of course, underground. Its doorless entrance separates the twin guardians who are singularly unarmed. Proceedings inside are presided over by a hunchback perched on a green tennis umpire's chair. From high on he follows the performance of the pissing men lined up against the wall, scribbling away all the while in a large notebook, dedicated to keeping an accurate score. The variations in performance are significant, ranging from fountains of spurting arches to miserable dribbles squeezed out with much effort between long intervals of desiccated groans.

My left hand neighbour, a long standing jovial youth remarks in a coarse accent to no one in particular " You ain't seen nuttin yet...it'll get real fucking hot...you just wait...the stuff to come will blow your fucking arse off..."

Coming up the stairs I find myself looking for a way out of the Amphitheatre. The idea of taking part in the duels I have just witnessed is intolerable. None of them measures down to my lack of stature, talent and bravery.

There are many alien passageways, many more unfamiliar doors, all guarded, all suspiciously unlocked. Unlabelled, there is no knowing which offers an escape.

Although each guard wears an idiosyncratic expression there is no clue in their faces as to what lies behind the particular door they happen to mind. The choice is thus arbitrary, an impossible choice for me to make.

Undecided, still, I see one of the doors open of its own accord with the guard bowing deep to usher me through.

On the other side I join a queue of orderly, single minded men. Drugged on reckless ambition they are all candidates for the duels to come. As the line moves sedately towards the reception area I attempt, for appearances' sake, to engage those in my vicinity in light hearted banter. Just to show that I belong. They are not responsive, seeming not to care for the business of exchanging words.

Hoping no one takes any interest in me, I drift harmlessly down the passage and land myself in a warehouse crammed full of duelling weapons, each one sufficiently bizarre to inspire its own cult of dreadful fear.

Eyes averted, much diminished, I now hasten through a series of classrooms wherein all known forms of the Art of Confrontation are currently taught.

My impression is that I have been here a number of times before, that I failed on each occasion, that I want no part of the same teachers, same pupils, same curriculum in my life ever again.

Trying hard to make myself invisible I am now in full flight. Rushing along unquestioning passages, sliding past unobservant doors, my one aim is to gain the outside air. Surprisingly, of all the guards and sundry personnel, no one bothers to bar my way.

All is mercifully quiet outside. There is not another soul in sight. Relenting my hurried steps I turn back to see the Amphitheatre of Duels. It is there no more. Even so I feel safer on the move. I keep going, I do not know for how long or how far but further and further away from the challenge of single combat.

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The duellists seldom reach one another. Before the pursuit abuts, one of them, stung a hundredfold, blinded, plunges into the honey. Struggles manfully and long against the treacherous substance. Exhausted, sinks beneath the surface. Suspended in honey, his grotesque figure remains still and clearly visible from every single point of view.

The winner, in the meanwhile, takes home the public adulation and all the sweetness of an untroubled life.

In the third duel, the protagonists do not set eyes on each other. Standing on the outer edge of a small circular platform of a gothic tower, diametrically opposed, they look down on a mosaic stone pavement far, far below. With large, finely feathered wings attached to arms held fast together at the back, the duellists have the semblance of birds set to fly.

At the very tip of the tower a giant egg-timer is set into motion. All eyes, except those of the birdmen, are fixed on the moving sand. Yet the only two men who cannot see the timer are the ones affected by the ebbing of time. For they know that once the sands have run out their pinioned arms cannot come apart. They are also painfully aware just how fatally their two lives are intertwined. The one who jumps first sets free the wings of his opponent, whilst his own remain firmly locked. It is therefore for each man a simple matter of judging the moment to take off.

Duellists are given ample opportunity to practice. They acquire an uncanny sense of passing time. Thus it virtually never happens for both of them to be too late. Invariably, despite all the practice, one birdman, in the severity of the duel, dives a fraction too early. He plummets head first unto the stone pavement and lies there, a grossly mangled figure in full public view.

His fortunate antagonist, wings majestically wide, soars over the amazed, envious multitude, to fly high, easy and victorious for all the days of his life.

The choice of weapon for the fourth duel is inhuman. The parties fight each other, quite naked, with antlers affixed to their heads on cunningly sculpted masks of noble

stags. In keeping with the theme and to enhance the dramatic quality, both hands and feet are encased in leather hoofs contrived so that the men can neither stand, nor walk nor fight effectively with their fists. The points of the antlers, on the contrary, are razor sharp, designed to cut into the flesh deep enough to draw blood but not so deep as to prematurely kill.

Down on all fours the human stags charge head first. Antlers locked, each one tries to lift and turn his rival by main force. Evenly matched, both still fresh and strong, at first there is but a rattling clash of heads and some fierce shoving to and fro. These preliminaries, indecisive as they are, serve to weaken the fighters. They also serve to assess relative strengths, and permit time to set odds and lay bets.

Eventually tiredness sets in. Neck muscles sag, making it possible to get past a cumbersome head, to attack the unprotected flesh. The colour of blood presents itself in thin, clean drawn lines, which turns ragged running ribbons, as the two bodies are being flayed alive.

Even so it takes a long time for one of them to collapse on his skinless back and offer up a soft underbelly for the final kill.

The still standing, bloodied half stag half man is led staggering away, garlanded, to be worshipped as a god. The carcass on the reddened ground is left a meal to a pack of ravenous dogs.

Sometime into these excitements I am called upon to urinate. Since one duel succeeds another without formal intermissions there seems no convenient moment to vacate my seat of honour and slip unnoticed away. Nevertheless, as the fifth duel gets under way, under the regard of a disapproving populace I retire to seek private relief.

The public lavatory is, of course, underground. Its doorless entrance separates the twin guardians who are singularly unarmed. Proceedings inside are presided over by a hunchback perched on a green tennis umpire's chair. From high on he follows the performance of the pissing men lined up against the wall, scribbling away all the while in a large notebook, dedicated to keeping an accurate score. The variations in performance are significant, ranging from fountains of spurting arches to miserable dribblets squeezed out with much effort between long intervals of desiccated groans.

My left hand neighbour, a long standing jovial youth remarks in a coarse accent to no one in particular " You ain't seen nuttin yet...it'll get real fucking hot...you just wait...the stuff to come will blow your fucking arse off..."

Coming up the stairs I find myself looking for a way out of the Amphitheatre. The idea of taking part in the duels I have just witnessed is intolerable. None of them measures down to my lack of stature, talent and bravery.

There are many alien passageways, many more unfamiliar doors, all guarded, all suspiciously unlocked. Unlabelled, there is no knowing which offers an escape.

Although each guard wears an idiosyncratic expression there is no clue in their faces as to what lies behind the particular door they happen to mind. The choice is thus arbitrary, an impossible choice for me to make.

Undecided, still, I see one of the doors open of its own accord with the guard bowing deep to usher me through.

On the other side I join a queue of orderly, single minded men. Drugged on reckless ambition they are all candidates for the duels to come. As the line moves sedately towards the reception area I attempt, for appearances' sake, to engage those in my vicinity in light hearted banter. Just to show that I belong. They are not responsive, seeming not to care for the business of exchanging words.

Hoping no one takes any interest in me, I drift harmlessly down the passage and land myself in a warehouse crammed full of duelling weapons, each one sufficiently bizarre to inspire its own cult of dreadful fear.

Eyes averted, much diminished, I now hasten through a series of classrooms wherein all known forms of the Art of Confrontation are currently taught.

My impression is that I have been here a number of times before, that I failed on each occasion, that I want no part of the same teachers, same pupils, same curriculum in my life ever again.

Trying hard to make myself invisible I am now in full flight. Rushing along unquestioning passages, sliding past unobservant doors, my one aim is to gain the outside air. Surprisingly, of all the guards and sundry personnel, no one bothers to bar my way.

All is mercifully quiet outside. There is not another soul in sight. Relenting my hurried steps I turn back to see the Amphitheatre of Duels. It is there no more. Even so I feel safer on the move. I keep going, I do not know for how long or how far but further and further away from the challenge of single combat.

CHAPTER X

TRAIN JOURNEY

In the middle of nowhere I light upon an abandoned railway station. A once purposeful building in now not in use. The ticket office, with its counter fine polished by countless monetary transactions, is untenanted. A time table of departures and arrivals is for services which no longer run.

And yet there is a train standing at the forlorn platform. The engine is building up a head of steam, ready to pull out of the station.

The train was once a passenger train. No longer. Its coaches have been replaced by trucks, and cattle trucks at that. There are no animals, no humans and no freight on board.

Against my better judgement I am persuaded to take a chance and go on a journey of undisclosed destination.

Lying on my back, alone under a protective night sky of softly flickering stars, soothed by the powerful breathing of an engine steadfastly at work, moving along simple straight lines on well bedded sleepers, I am rocked into a somnolent state of quiet euphoria by a rhythmic motion peculiar to trains.

Unfortunately we stop from time to time at stations less deserted than mine to take on other passengers. They come singly or in unremarkable numbers but as no one nowhere ever disembarks, the train is slowly filled with humanity.

The men are of all shapes and sizes. Short and tall. Thin. Wiry. Soft and fat. Ruddy, pale, craggy and smooth. Feeble, muscular, hirsute and bald.

Some are dressed warmly in woolly winter coats, others have donned full formal evening wear. Some come wrapped in casual gear, others travel in running shorts, barefoot. Some are weighed down by excess luggage, some have packed essentials only, some are accompanied by a smart briefcase securely locked and some carry nothing at all.

But irrespective of all the differences they cherish and display, a common streak runs through them all. They have boarded the train in great haste, having removed themselves abruptly from a life under serious threat.

The haunted look in their pale, shifting eyes, the constant turning and twisting of the neck, the restless repetitive gesture of the hand, one and all betray the painful fact

that they are on this train without any particular destination in mind. They simply had to get away, and get away fast.

To confirm the urgency of their departure the train is now enveloped in a characteristic smell. A smell which advertises itself throughout the animal kingdom, recognising no boundaries of species, no barriers of race. The odious smell of fear.

Fear impels all kinds of evacuations from the body, solid, liquid and gaseous, but it has a subtle secretion of its own. Isolated to a single individual the smell merely invites persecution. Spread by contagion to a crowd it becomes a stench, the stench of sheer panic. As the train sucks in more and more men seeking refuge, as the trucks are filled to capacity, as the air for breathing is strictly rationed, this stench, over and above the smell of the individual evacuations, is now overpowering.

Inside there is no more room to move. Not even transpose my body within its own confines. Outside, on the contrary, space expands. Despite the ever increasing weight of fleeing humanity, the train accelerates. Straining heart and lung, the engine screams ahead into the night. Behind, the hurtling trucks jar, jolt, screech and sway in terror from side to side.

And still the insane pace mounts. Everything outside and everybody inside is out of control. Nausea rises in my gorge.

But it is decreed, decreed by powers unknown to me, that the journey must stop. It does. Precisely at dawn, with the first ray of light, the train comes to a juddering halt. Disembarking, we are staring down the edge of a picturesque precipice.

There ought to be a general relief. And as the men peer into the abyss of their escape, they all kneel and cross themselves. But celebrations are perforce brief. The overriding urge to escape drives us all on and on and on.

CHAPTER XI

THE BLACK EAGLE

There are no roads, not even paths, so everybody takes to the fields and the fields are all fresh ploughed. The going is soft and is getting softer all the time. Yet to move, and move at speed is of the essence. We all have a predator at our back.

Our predators are victim specific. Having sworn to forsake all others, they are each devoted to one man. Long victimised, we know intimately our own tormentor. As we run in slow motion, we do not dare, we do not need, to look back.

I see ahead a field of discarded possessions, scattered articles of clothing and naked running men. I see nothing in pursuit.

Hovering behind me is the black eagle of my fears. She swoops ever closer. She flies with ever increasing ferocity.

My leaden legs are captured in the crumbling soil. Freeing one leaves the other buried deeper still. I am left without breath, sweating terror, moving hardly at all.

The eagle is now almost upon me. I am deafened by the flapping of her massive wings. They chill my overheated back. I sense the talons poised to grip a collapsing heap of trembling flesh that once upon a time could just about have passed for a real man.

On the point of her striking I fall conveniently into a dead faint. On recovering my senses the whole wretched sequence re-enacts itself again.

I cannot tell the precise number of replays, but just as I resign myself to the endless cycle, I am delivered through the agency of a most unlikely source.

CHAPTER XII

THE ISLAND OF HUMAN SACRIFICE

A fierce group of black skinned warriors appears on the scene. Chanting menacing songs they fight off the eagle of my fears. They pick me up and I am carried in a makeshift litter, shoulder high on a sea of waving weapons, to an altogether other location.

In their compound, I am bathed in sweet scented water, laid to rest on a mat of dense undergrowth and have my body anointed with palm oil, head to toe.

After an appropriate period of deceptive calm the decorators arrive. With bone needles and a rich variety of vegetable dyes, they work diligently upon my well primed skin, to inscribe a litany of symbols and meaningless signs.

In gay colours, ornate, with my feet never touching the ground, I am brought forthwith into the presence of the Chief. Surrounded by an expectant audience, ignoring all the rest of me, the Chief spends an inordinate amount of time examining the soles of my feet. In keeping with tribal expectations, he nods slowly, sagely, repeatedly, his venerable head. At long last, with an authoritative gesture, he pronounces himself satisfied. The elders murmur their approval, echoed by the warriors, women and children down the line.

I stand up in fine leather sandals, which are now newly and permanently glued to my feet, whilst the members of the tribe all fall on their knees in an unmistakable act of divine worship. Rising, the warriors now lead me, with great circumspection, over an ornamental bridge to the Temple of Sacrifices. The temple is ominously set, as such temples always are, on an island.

The bridge and temple are guarded by the servitors of the tribal totem. Wrapped in the skins of long dead reptiles, they perform requisite rites and look after the resident inmates on the island. For, as I soon discover, there are quite a few of us, uniformly decorated, sandals glued to feet, sharing a communal hut and the prospect of the same future fate.

A newcomer to the group, my entrance provokes surprisingly little hostility. I am doubly welcome, as a fellow inmate and as an opportunity to devolve painful news. Each one of them is gleefully eager to acquaint me with the unbearable facts, hoping against all reason by such transmission to escape their inevitable consequence.

The privilege of divulging how matters stand falls to the oldest, most experienced resident. A kind man, with a mane of white hair, he takes me on a walk round the island. Looking into his grey, benign eyes as we two stroll together, I hear delivered in a gentle voice, the following tale:

“They are primitive, very childish, you know. They believe in a crocodile goddess. She is supposed to be a sort of Great Mother of all creation. Without her, there is no life. Nothing grows, nothing is born. No fruit, no little succulent pigs, no babies, no living thing at all.

She is truly powerful. Too powerful to be trusted. Her benevolence cannot be taken for granted. She must be constantly reminded, asked, induced to go on providing life. And, of course, you can’t ask unless you give something in return. Something that you value and something she indubitably likes.

That is why, you see my friend, they thought of the idea of human sacrifice.

With their own eyes they would observe the fondness crocodiles have for human flesh and we all know how men prize their own lives.

They sacrificed children and young girls at first. Then in a bad season, when nothing much grew and the babies conceived in the famine were still born, doubts started to creep in. They wondered why the goddess was upset. Wondered if she found the sacrifices too mundane. Perhaps she had her eye on lives of greater worth.

So came the turn of warriors, then servitors and priests, and finally, in times of acute tribal stress, they adopted the custom of regularly sacrificing their own chiefs.

They must have carried on thus for a good long stretch of time because such scenes are embedded in their stories of ancient times. But, some seven or eight generations back, the man they call the Great Chief entirely transformed the rites.

Something of a thinker with a poetic turn of mind, he drew the tribe’s attention to the one glaring weakness of the crocodile: her pitifully slow movement on dry land.

Dwelling on the ease with which man outpaced her, he painted a wistful sadness into those large sleepy eyes as they mourned the loss of a fast moving prey. He called the whole tribe to witness the great yearning crocodiles have for those who run away. Men, who value their own lives above all else, became therefore the highest sacrifice.

The goddess wanted most precisely those most afraid to die.

It was the Great Chief who turned them into hunters of men on the run. It was he who taught them to read the soles of feet, to determine a man’s exact degree of cowardice.

Yes, incredibly, they can actually tell when and why and with what shame you ran away, just by examining the footprints you leave in the sand. And, once they are satisfied that you are a worthy offering, you are a marked man. Lest your feet be soiled by touching the ground, henceforth they are sandal bound.

Worshipped thus, your sacrificial value is raised, the goddess is appeased and the flow of life marvellously assured.

And that's how it is. Please do not ask any questions. The next offering takes place when the moon is full. Be patient, rest and try to gather strength."

With these words of admonishment I am left alone to face the descending twilight of a full moon. Her unclouded face casts an approving light on the deadly ceremony about to take place.

Inside the temple, the solemn chief sits cross-legged on a throne of shields. To his left, serried ranks of warriors are stamping the ground in mounting expectation. To his right, on a raised platform, we, the honoured guests and future candidates, stand petrified in a protective shell of disbelief. In the middle, wrists tied to an elevated

beam, hangs the chosen victim. At a cruel distance below his dangling feet an inlet of the surrounding lake awaits, under a mirrormooth surface, the playful children of a goddess to whom mercy is unknown. The servitors, in their scaly habits, man the underwater gates and lead the dreadful incantations to summon a presence already in their midst.

Judging the moment propitious, the chief gives the desired sign. The gates are unhinged, the stolid waters surge, seethe and come to the boil. There is a hesitant second of silence before the first crocodile jaws come rearing up towards feet which are now in frenetic motion. And as the long, teeth encrusted jaws keep foraging, the frenzied movement of the feet gives the distinct impression of running. Running fast, running desperately, but never running away!

The chief smiles, the warriors dance, the servitors raise their chanting voices. The great mother goddess must be pleased with the sacrifice: an accomplished coward who cannot run away.

The uneven struggle seems agonisingly long, fear feeding the tortured body with unnatural strength. Still, eventually the legs tire, and first the one, then shortly the other, is torn off. The truncated, bleeding body goes on convulsing as I close my eyes to the sickening scene. But I still hear the sound of the body crash into the water and the final scream dragged under watery turbulence.

There are twenty eight days and twenty eight nights for the moon to wane and wax full again. Well before then, I am told, the Chief will designate who is to be next. He always comes alone to sniff out the most craven cowardice. There is no hiding from him, his ultra sensitive nose never fails.

The prospect of this ordeal fills my vital organs with such foreboding that I can neither eat, nor sleep, nor rest.

In my misery I turn to the old man who has been so kind to me. He treats my feeble, hastily gathered ideas with a degree of forbearance which leaves no room for

hope. In the whole of his long tenure on the island no attempt was made to escape. No one dared swim across the crocodile invested waters. Nobody was prepared to take the chance of an imminent death against one horribly certain but undated as yet.

After all there appears to be a continuous supply of new captives and every witnessing of a sacrifice deadens the shock.

As for simply explaining to the Chief that there is no Great Mother, that things just grow on their own, that new life is born naturally and goes on living regardless, that there is no need to sacrifice - he tells me to forget it. Such a rational world these childlike people could not even begin to understand.

Then he takes me by the hand, draws me down beside him and we sit on the fallen trunk of a dead tree, the old man speaks to me with a compassion of a father I no longer have.

"You see, my friend, the decorations on our skin are not there merely to please the native eye. Imprinted on our bodies we carry the sacred meaning of sacrifice. It took an age and a great deal of bribery to decipher it. Roughly translated into our more formal language the text reads along these lines:

Oh Great Goddess of Life, we beg you to accept this excellent gift. A man, like us, he moves upright on two feet and keeps his hands free to make weapons and other useful things. He is our brother, of the same blood, the same flesh, the same bones. All his life he has been running away from you, but tethered he cannot run away any more. Your hungry children have long yearned for him, let them come now and freely partake of the meal.

For we know and acknowledge that without death there can be no life, that for every living being another being has to die, that for each new-born life other lives remain forever unborn.

For we know and acknowledge your power to make a choice, to shrivel one and make another grow, to starve one and nourish another, to kill one and let another go.

We offer you the life of our brother, part of ourselves, to guide and celebrate your choice. In return, you the Great Mother of All, will allow us each, the unsacrificed, to live long, flourish and grow ever strong.

For we know and acknowledge the law of sacrifice: A life offered and taken redeems the life of one who kills."

Wondering for days listless with this new intelligence all over the Island of Human Sacrifice, I am blinded by the harsh light of a sudden discovery. In desperate straits, ideas of the last resort seem always to inspire me.

It is simple. To escape my predetermined destiny all I need do is to cut off one of my feet. Without a foot I cannot run, I do not conform to the sacred text, I am no longer an excellent gift, I am not a worthy sacrifice.

Having a tourniquet applied to my left leg, with an axe poised in my right hand, I hesitate long enough in this awkward posture to turn into stone. And so, as a piece of sculpture, I qualify as a possible subject for the Gallery of Wasted Lives.

CHAPTER XIII

THE GALLERY OF WASTED LIVES

The owner, a podgy, smug, fastidious man, receives me with a proprietary interest. His preamble, as everything about him, is well rehearsed.

“ The public finds our collection relatively small, but then we are rigorous in our selection. We have no interest in the multitude. The ordinary man who idles away his life in trivialities, is to us irrelevant. We specialise in the rare, the exceptional, men who had it in them to reach greatness and never did.

Keeping the numbers down makes it possible to study the fine detail. To focus on the delicate fault line between what was and what might have been.

You will appreciate the device of fragmented lenses, which, I am proud to say, is unique to our gallery. It bifurcates the subject's vision: the right eye looks back on the memories of a lifetime, whilst the left eye hallucinates the lost glory of an unlived life. I recommend you observe the tragic composition of each set of eyes, jointly grieving the demise of a cherished childhood friend. There is nothing quite like it.”

Exhibit One: The Musician

Alone on stage, in the benign limelight of a concert hall, an absorbed figure in full formal evening wear plays the grand piano.

Inspired by his own composition, the enraptured body is swaying melodiously in compliance with the moving power of music which is self induced. Arms fully engaged, supple wrists set at all angles, fingers floating, skimming, swooping, caressing, hitting with obsessive repetition a range of black and white keys, the musician and the music are at one.

In the wings, two hundred sixty three young, untalented girls, seated in front of uprights, are hammering out, set piece exercises. Ranged behind them, there are two hundred and sixty three comfortable drawing rooms, furnished with as many aspiring mothers. And, stretching into the far distance, one hundred times as many undemanding hours, spent in instilling minute improvements in skills which would never be good enough to be of any real use.

Inspired by his own composition, the enraptured body is swaying melodiously in compliance with the moving power of music which is self induced. Arms fully engaged,

supple wrists set at all angles, fingers floating, skimming, swooping, caressing, hitting with obsessive repetition a range of black and white keys, the musician and the music are at one.

There is just one flaw in the entire performance. The piano is dumb. The keys are linked to nothing, nothing strikes the chords. Not a solitary single sound is audible in the vastness of the concert hall.

This is not altogether strange since every member of the distinguished audience is stone deaf and the only one who can hear the agonising silence is the pianist who has a perfect musical ear.

“Truly original mind, lots of fresh musical ideas, could never quite break away from the routine of teaching. A cumulative tumour of little bits of cowardice, sad really” the unctuous escort whispers to me, in a loud voice.

Exhibit Two: The General

The decisive moment of the war. With the destiny of the country resting precariously on his shoulders, through a pair of biased binoculars, the general surveys a traditional battleground scene. The churned up field is richly decorated with the familiar emblems of military carnage: charred armour, disjointed pieces of artillery, unexploded shells, stray bodies of fallen soldiers, weapons, helmets, belts, arms, legs and other erstwhile personal possessions.

Jaws firmly set, eyes exuding calm, the general is well poised to enjoy the battle to come. The enemy has broken through the defensive lines, his own disorganised troops are retreating in full flight, precisely as planned. The trap is set. Concealed on the two flanks, massive, highly mobile forces, in disciplined orders, are ready to execute the classical pincer movement, which will win the day, the battle, and the war.

With the high command in a state of rising tension, the general finally gives the order to attack. The signal is instantly passed down the line. But response, there is none. No movement, no movement at all. For the forces in the entire war zone, friend and foe, dead or alive, are frozen in a permanent stand still, captured at this precise moment of inaction, for all time.

In the incongruous background, out of focus, an enthusiastic army of uniformed salesmen is climbing a mountain of dazzling white washing powder. They are expertly led by a greying figure with a life time expertise in clever media campaigns. Campaigns aimed at undermining competing brands and winning the Great War of Market Share.

“A military brain of Napoleonic proportions, pity he could not stand bayonet work at close quarters. Left the army for a promising marketing job” comments the gallery owner, in a patronising voice.

Exhibit Three: The Prophet

Hair flowing in wild abundance, attired in plain vestment free of man made fibre and chemical dyes, the prophetic figure stands head and shoulders above an admiring band of apostolic disciples.

Eyes raised to a visionary distance, He proclaims the end of the world. At least, the world as we know it.

Our race has been too successful. There are far too many human lives and each one of them is vastly overvalued. There is simply too much unselfish love, spread indiscriminately all around, for God to tolerate it any longer.

His caressing voice insinuates into the undefended ears of pliant disciples cataclysmic events of such meteorological, bacterial and mutational magnitude as to render all existing faiths devoid of meaning.

At the charismatic height of his revelation, as He imparts, in stage whispers, the great secret of selflessly loving one's own self, there is a sudden intrusion. Headed by a sleek bishop, assembled in convenient chapters, an ecclesiastic column is snaking its way into the Prophet's heart.

Vicars, sextons, churchwardens and ordinary parishioners with a common assortment of ailments, funerals, christenings, nuptials and functions of a lesser kind, oft repeated sermons and innumerable words of comfort worn threadbare with excessive use, are all present and oppressingly there. And they come not in their numbers to crucify and sanctify the Prophet, they come in pity and with remorse to mark his mundane existence.

"He did genuinely hear the voice of God calling not just twice, but many more times. Sadly, he was a little too afraid of the terrible loneliness of a holy life" is all the commentary offered by the pretentious purveyor of cruel Art.

Exhibit Four: The Scientist

In a laboratory of computer governed experiments, riding solo a complex track of electronic impulses, a human observer scans a microscopic screen.

In defiance of all published research on molecular structures, he confidently expects to isolate a single gene somewhere on that screen. A gene that, all on its own, condemns us to age. Once isolated, stripped of its influential connections, this evil genius of human mortality may be confined, made harmless and eventually, perhaps, operated right out of this world. Is it at all possible that one fine, historic day, man should discover a less than deadly fate?!

But the scientist is working in vain. What appears on the screen is no ageing gene but the circular march of marginal notes to discoveries that mattered and did truly change the world. A miscellany of pedantic refinements which repeats itself in a reproachful loop of well observed insignificance.

“Brilliant, penetrating, unorthodox - he had it all. Could so easily have come up with the big one, but for his morbid fear of being wrong, of being ridiculed. Such a great shame” the accompanying voice insists, with no trace of sympathy.

Exhibit Five: The Philosopher

Serene on a throne of meaningfully sculpted words, the philosopher holds discourse with the great thinkers of the past. Great thinkers whose thoughts are still alive.

He knows them personally, having walked with every one of them, at least part of the way, in a dialogue of profound disagreements. On parting each one bequeathed him the last will and testament of the Truth, a Truth reputedly dead and deeply buried. The documents, still well preserved, betray a bewildering range of instructions. Although rife in contradictions, dismissive of each other, they all enshrine the Truth and place it in the same popular, consecrated ground.

The present transaction, in front of such a distinguished audience, is nothing less than the ceremonial disinterring of the Truth. To demonstrate once and for all that the Truth is alive, unique, immutable and immortal.

It is the moment that precedes the ceremony. When the understanding is complete. When the sumptuous diversity of a dissolute universe is held perfectly together in one sublime metaphysic. When a single self-evident principle is necessary and sufficient to initiate and sustain an irresistible succession of realities, ranged in an ascending, logical order.

When the One divides and keeps dividing into Two, and all throughout the infinite divisions it still remains, wholly and miraculously, One.

The philosopher never pronounces. The ceremony does not take place. There is to be no majestic procession of seminal ideas. In their place an unruly mob of disparate commercial deals makes its boastful way into the centre of the discourse to put a premature end to all philosophic pretension.

The deals come in all sizes. Profit and loss may vary, the risks and rewards may not be the same, but they all consume time and energy, and the collective weight of their material success is enough to shatter the one great idea into a thousand trivial smithereens.

“Such an original, profound, penetrating thinker. Such vision. Could have produced an all time classic. The pity is, he was afraid of the magnitude of his own potential achievement, and became just one of the many successful businessmen of his age” comments the deprecating voice of my irritating guide.

Exhibit Six: The Grandmaster

Surveying the board, eyes half closed, the grandmaster is in absolute control. He has thought through the position, is fully aware of the ramifications and can foresee any future to come.

His pawns are in a solid formation. His remaining bishop sweeps powerfully across the black diagonals. His knights are linked and menacing. The castles are all gone but his king is safe and well protected. And the queen, the powerful, the cherished queen is poised to launch the final, sacrificial attack. On the next move she will be offered and taken in a forced exchange. Five moves later it is check mate against any possible defence.

The entire game, from its innovative opening, through an imaginative development, to a spectacular ending, has a deeply satisfying unity. It is also a game that shall never be played to its conclusion.

As the grandmaster is about to make the pivotal move, the whole position, players, pieces and board, are snowed under an avalanche of insurance policies, written over the period of a working life devoted to securing childish compensation for the loss of life, property and limb.

"A genius of the highest order, might Twenty-two points, plus triple-word-score, plus fifty points for using all my letters. Game's over. I'm outta here. well have rewritten chess history. Unfortunately, he could not bear the constant thought of defeat and so devoted his life to selling insurance policies" remarks the proprietor in near contemptuous tones.

There are an unspecified number of further exhibits, obviously waiting to be viewed, but I am prepared to stay here no longer.

The torment of the subjects, transfixed as they are on a cross of unredeemable regret between two incompatible lives, is too much for me to endure.

And then there is the owner of the gallery. His presence is offensive. His pretentious words grate on my uneducated perception. Above all, something in his manner is most disturbing. He seems to fancy me for one of his exhibits.

Reluctantly he allows me to leave but on my leaving, he forces on me the unwelcome gift of what I take to be his customary parting speech:

"What we are after, in our modest way, is that essential little courage, and the want of it, that makes all the difference. With Beauty, Faith, Triumph, Immortality, Truth and Perfection at stake, we are left with the tragic regrets of successful lives, lives of no inherent significance.

Do not misunderstand me, we have nothing against teachers, advertising executives, men of the cloth, academics, business men, insurance salesmen and what have you, they are no doubt all necessary and useful.

The fascination lies in what these few of them might have been, had they but been able to overcome their particular brand of fear.

What is of abiding interest to us, is their awareness of the life they so narrowly missed."

Determined not to become a public exhibit in this cruel place, I hasten, I am on my way.

CHAPTER XIV

CONCEIVED

On the road leading away from the Gallery of Wasted Lives, walking in a heavy downpour of sorrowful tears, I am accosted by a man of short stature who claims to be my father.

Due to poor visibility I cannot quite make out his features, but his gestures and forceful manner of speaking are certainly familiar.

“Since you do not seem to remember, let me remind you of that night, more than half a century ago, when, in a five star bed at the Hotel Bristol, adjacent to the Vienna Opera House, your mother and I laboured so hard to make you be.

Of course there was pleasure, but pleasure had nothing to do with it. I had better fucks with juicy peasant girls all over the unspoilt countryside of blessed Hungary.

Yes, there was desire, after all we had been apart for a good few weeks, but desire had nothing to do with it. I had a more powerful itch for the daughters of the minor Italian nobility, when posted to the southern front.

The point of that night was you.

You alone were the inspiration behind every single thrust into that lovely female flesh I wooed with admirable tenacity over seven long, obstinate years. As I strove to force her wide open, as I reined in our abandon to intensify her yearning, as I prepared the climax with disciplined timing, I had one sole objective: to have myself a son.

On that night, with infinite care I assembled all the essentials of myself and reduced them to a single particle of passion.

A passion voracious enough to consume more than one generation. A passion strong enough to shape more than one life.

On that night, bouncing on a finely sprung mattress, to the accompaniment of a gently creaking bed and your mother’s involuntary screams, with that particle of passion I made you what you are.

Let it be clear therefore between us that my future prospects are permanently enfranchised in your life. And it is not at all indifferent to me what you do, or don’t do, with that life”.

Although I buried my father in Africa a good many years ago, his reappearance does not constitute a shock. I have always suspected that the burial wasn't entirely successful, that he wasn't altogether dead.

What he says, in the main, is not new to me. Even so, his brutal frankness takes me aback. The cutting edge to his words opens ancient wounds. And the glib reference to **his** future prospects, gives me quite a turn.

Frankly, I did not think my father had any future. Any prospects still in the offing, I had considered strictly my own.

Before I can gather my thoughts to formulate a reasoned response, the man of short stature leaves me with an indulgent smile and a warning I find difficult to ignore.

“Hard as you may struggle, you shall have no peace of mind unless you fulfil my restless ambition. And if you chose not to be accountable to me, you will have to answer for your life to God, or, at the end of the day, worse still, you will have to justify it to your dying self.”

CHAPTER XV

IN BABYLON

A much troubled son, I travel swiftly through many generations of overambitious fathers to meet Zedekiah, the son of Josiah, the son of Amon, the son of Menasseh, erstwhile king of Judah.

I find him at the fabulous court of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, kneeling in chains below the high table. Kingly robes in tatters, hair growing wild all over his head, blind sockets instead of eyes, he presents a shocking contrast to the pomp and splendour all around.

There is no scintillating conversation as we sit around eating local delicacies off looted golden plates and imbibe from silver goblets a rich variety of tributary wines, supplied courtesy of freshly conquered regions. The courtiers are brief and politically correct. The client kings of Edom, Tyrus, Moab, Zidon and such like, sitting on embarrassingly low stools, are marvellous silent. Nebuchadnezzar, on my left, has the word and the word, disconcertingly, is addressed to me.

“Terror. Terror is the only thing. Without terror there is no order, no work, no peace, no civilisation, no empire. I can’t have standing armies in every fortified city from here to Egypt. Mounting campaigns against places we have already cleaned out once is expensive and unprofitable. As for loyalty, you can never rely on it. No sooner my back is turned, there is intrigue, rumour, secret Egyptian promises, and lo and behold, a full scale rebellion.

Take this wretch, kneeling here. I chose him myself and crowned him king ahead of twenty other princes with a better claim to the throne. I gave him title and name and, kissing my hand, he swore eternal allegiance. They all do, of course. They are full of oaths. They swear on the lives of their mothers, their children, their gods. It makes no damned difference. When the time comes, and I am a long way off, fighting some other distant war, all the fine oaths are consigned to oblivion. Well, this miserable remnant of a king makes it a more difficult, for those who owe me, to forget.

Yes, the slaying of those boys was a bloody sight... there must have been, if I remember, eight or nine... none of them older than twelve. Yes, the howling of the man with his eyes poked out, did jar on my ears.

But it makes a lasting impression. A traitor taking with him into a blind old age, as the last sight on earth, the agonising death of all his sons, believe me, that does make a lasting impression. All men would find it hard to bear, but for a king, seeing the final extinction of his line, is an abominable, festering pain.

I know I have something of a fearful reputation. But, actually, I don't like to see any man in such a pitiful state. I would have put him out of his misery years ago, it's just that he is such a useful, living demonstration of the price of betrayal.

The presence of a blind, broken, grovelling ex-king, is instructive. He makes my distinguished guests eat less and think rather more."

Nebuchadnezzar, the king of kings, retires at last. His retinue fades fast away. The guests rise and without a backward glance, slink shamefaced off stage. The guards, having gorged themselves on the remains of the repast, lie in a drunken stupor, oblivious to duty, pride and their brief moment of history.

Forgotten, Zedekiah is alone with his pain.

I kneel beside him on that priceless mosaic floor and press a silver chalice, full of wine, to his dry lips. Zedekiah takes the drinking vessel out of my hand, runs his fingers over the pomegranates that decorate its rim, gulps down the wine and after a long hesitation, holding the empty chalice, haltingly begins to speak:

"It is from the Temple, is it not? And the Temple, it is destroyed, is it not? And Jerusalem is razed to the ground, is it not? And the people of Judah are in captivity, here in Babylon, are they not? And my sons, they are all dead, are they not? And our God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all Israel, is truly a terrible God, is He not?

He is not to be seen, He is not there to be touched, He cannot be worshipped as we are accustomed to worship other gods. Yet He is worse, much worse, than all of the terrible deities put together...

You remember the red gold chariots drawn by those fiery horses as they dazzled and displayed the mighty God of the Sun... how we beseeched him to deflect his rays... not to scorch the earth, not to burn the crop...

Surely, you have not forgotten those massive, magnificent bulls carved out of stone... and altars on which we burnt so many herds of prime cattle... as we prayed to Baal to bring on the capricious rain...

Perhaps you were too young to go up to the high places... and breathe the intoxicating air of unbridled passion as we drank and danced... and spent our seed into the young, inviting flesh of Ashtoreth... so that her priestesses would help our fields, our herds and the wombs of our women swell and swell and grow...

I wonder if you ever saw children go through the fire to Moloch... if you witnessed the ordeal of first born sons... an ordeal which is meant to appease the rage of this mighty god... I wonder if you noticed how a father changes after seeing his child

against the flames, how his heart softens, how sweetly he sings thereafter, as he puts his children to sleep...

And to stand against such phenomenal powers, powers that dominate our people's daily lives, who does our God decide to chose? A wild, improbable man reciting his own, threatening poetry and prophesising instant calamities in dubious verse.

To proscribe a people's worship, to uproot ancient ritual, to destroy all art and sacred artefact, to deny centuries of comforting belief, at the word of a self proclaimed messenger, sent by a demanding, righteous god, no one would ever see? Is that not asking too much from any ruler, never mind from somebody as constrained as me?

Oh yes, Jeremiah had the gift, had the presence, the language to impress the crowd... but was it fair, was it reasonable to expect me, a vassal king, put on the throne by Babylon, to overturn a way of life without some more substantial help?!

Maybe... maybe if I had had the strength, the courage, the single minded purpose of my father... maybe I could have tried... he was not plagued by doubts, he never listened, wouldn't take advice... a hard man, if he had any feelings, he betrayed none...

Us boys, we were brought up as soldiers from the time we could stand on our two feet... marching, running, wrestling, throwing spears, shooting arrows, fighting all day... he just adored every single thing to do with war.

That is how he got himself killed, you know... there is Necho coming out of Egypt on his way to fight the Chaldeans at Carchemish, minding his own business. But Josiah would not let him pass. He just had to challenge Necho to a fight nobody needed, a fight that benefited nobody. And once engaged, he would not sit in the rear, directing operations from a safe distance. He smuggled himself, in disguise, right to the front so that he could be in the thick of it.

Well, he certainly died a hero, in the valley of Megiddo, with an Egyptian arrow buried in his neck. It was still there, the shaft sticking out, when they carried the body to Jerusalem. A sight I would never forget... I must have been not quite ten years old at the time.

Why are we all so worried about how we are going to die... wondering when and where will the angel of death spread over us her merciful wings... prophets and soothsayers always promise a long life and a peaceful, homely death... to be gathered unto our fathers, as they say, and they sure know what we all want to hear...What chance of that, in these troubled times, for us, residual kings?"

Drawn by friendly wisps of sadness to the kneeling figure of an exiled, thoughtful king, I refill the chalice and place a few fat cushions between the marble floor and a body sagging under the weight of heavy years.

"You are not going to ask me silly questions... whether I regret doing this or not doing that, whether, in hindsight, I should have taken an altogether different

course... and saved my sons... my eyesight... my crown... and Jerusalem...

Should I have unleashed, in the likeness of my father, a monstrous wave of death and destruction, burning every fine statue, every piece of art and artifice in the land, cutting down ancient groves and grinding to dust sacred altars all over the high places, slaughtering prophets, priests, wizards and other men of the spirit with indiscriminate abandon... why? In order to compel a people to worship exclusively just one, fiercely jealous, god...

How could I have done any of that?! I am not the man my father was. I dislike confrontation. I am no good at fighting. The spilling of blood has always made me nervous and I have never been seized by a holy zeal to exterminate anything.

On the contrary, I believed in religious tolerance at the time... It seemed to me that Baal and Ashtoreth and Moloch and most of the other gods had each something unique and meaningful to offer... they were so close, so real, so approachable...and the people drew so much comfort and hope from the moving rites... where was the harm...

Of course, Jeremiah, as always, was full of doom, disaster and dire threats. Of all the prophets the most extreme. Forever casting wild accusations all around, making impossible demands, getting mixed up in politics, walking about with a yoke on his neck as some kind of cheap Babylonian advertisement. Infuriating the government so that I had to save his life, not once but twice.

I confess I was not fond of the man... didn't like his ideas or his style. But I gave him a fair hearing, in public and in private. At least he was genuine... obviously convinced he could hear the very words of the Lord, ordained from on high to repeat them aloud, whatever the cost. The cost to him, to me, to Jerusalem, to the morale, to the war...

Why didn't I believe him? I am not sure... I am not at all sure, perhaps because he was just one of many who prophesied... each one foretelling some kind of devastating future, each one standing on his professional pride... perhaps because his message was so confused. He used to cram pronouncements on taxes, on the poor, local customs, minor gods, political alliances, the conduct of war and peace, into long and tiresome tirades...

Maybe because believing Jeremiah would have meant doing what I knew I was incapable of doing...

In any case, I had no idea how different our God was from all the other gods. I had no conception of what He was really like. He seemed so remote, aloof, unreal to me and to every one I knew in those days in Jerusalem. None of us imagined that He would let his people, his city, his holy temple, disappear from the face of this earth from one day to the next...

Why did I rebel? Why did I take on the might of Babylon, in the first place? Do you really think I chose to fight?! To defy Nebuchadnezzar was the last thing I wanted...

After the first invasion, with most of our skilled and educated people hostage, with our treasury bare, what we needed, most desperately needed, was peace. And to have a chance of peace, in those turbulent days, meant keeping out of trouble. Adopting a humble posture, speaking with one voice... very softly...

But then I expect you do not know the Jews. They are not like other people. They are stubborn...they move relentlessly between black despair and exultant expectation, never pausing long enough in a mundane reality to be content with what they have...

Every Jew knows more than the others and no two of them ever agree... And then they are so clever... not only do they know everything there is to know, they also have reasons... ten for every why and a hundred for every wherefore.

They convinced themselves for a wonderful variety of excellent reasons that Nebuchadnezzar would not return... because he was threatened by Elam in the North...because he had family problems... because he was too ill to travel... because he was overawed by the armies of Egypt... because there was an acute shortage of camels, and so on and so forth...

Word came from here, from there, from everywhere... word inflamed word, and in the conflagration of their collective pride there was no holding them back. The wildfire of rebellion was spreading even as our council was being torn apart...

Had I taken a stand, siding with the select Babylonian establishment, would I have carried the princes and the army with me? And even with their support could I have prevailed against the Egyptian faction and prevented the outbreak of a murderous civil war, Jew killing Jew, the collapse of law and order, chaos everywhere, a nation bent on self destruction?

I don't know the ifs and buts of events that never happened, but I have always been a man of peace... not a man of principle... a man of compromise, not honour... It was so much easier to refuse to pay a bill sent from afar than to confront, there and then, a people lashed into frenzy... screaming slogans of freedom, drunk on patriotic pride, seething with hatred...

For myself, I was not surprised to see the troops of Nebuchadnezzar appear on the hills of Jerusalem... what filled me with wonder was the men's resolve... we kept them at bay for two years... the greatest army in the world stranded in front of our walls for two long years... frustrated, impotent, covered in shame and mockery...

The words of Judah's last king languish still in the cavernous hall whilst he himself is now fast asleep. Lying at ease on a bed of finely woven rugs I had lovingly prepared, his soft, slowly measured breathing signifies a state of rest, restoration and much

needed relief. I know his lament is a yet incomplete. The more personal, intimate admissions, so hard to articulate, are still to come.

“To kill myself. To fall upon my sword. Like Saul at Gilboah. Like other noble and defeated kings in our troubled past. Do you believe this thought was not my constant, nagging companion all those many unheroic times when there was no action around the walls and we watched our daily ration of bread dwindle into miserable crumbs? Do you believe the idea did not haunt the nights I lay awake conjuring up endlessly repeated scenes of shameful torment if I were to fall into merciless, punishing hands?

But against all that there was always the tantalising, treacherous hope, the hope to see once more the rays of the rising sun lick red the sand castles of the desert hills, to feel once more the soft silken touch of a beautiful virgin's inner thigh, to hear once again the carefree sound of song and harp and dance at a daughter's wedding, a daughter dear to our heart...

Besides, the blade was too sharp and too cold and I was never brave enough to take even a single life...

But you did not come all this way to listen to the hapless musings of a discredited old man...you are not here to learn the fine details of a reign that went woefully wrong...

Like the rest of them, you come to feed off my misfortune, to gape at my private horror show. You want to feel, without the pain, without the torture, at no personal expense, what it was like to see my boys die and thereafter to see nothing at all...

I do not blame you... I am quite used to being an object of curiosity by now. As a matter of fact, I have never spoken to anyone about those... those events. People were content to gape and shudder and pass by... some mocked, some pitied... nobody cared, or dared, to ask...you are, I feel, genuinely terrified... pursued by personal fears that used to drive my royal past. Perhaps you deserve to be the first to hear what I try not to remember every single day...

But I warn you, you will be disappointed... what happened on that day went far beyond the powers of my endurance... what you are about to hear can in no way measure up to the pain, the grief, the dread of the intended punishment...

Between the passing of the sentence and its execution, time stood still. My stomach was in a cramp, my bowels were water, my ears were singing, my body was covered in sweat and the whole of me trembled in high fever. When they brought to me Yehuhazak, my first born, I was too sick to look him in the eye... nor could I bring forth a word to send him on his way... he stood in front of me, smiling, tall, and said quietly: do not worry, father, I shall not let you down... he kissed me on both cheeks, turned and went with unhurried steps to meet the butcher, alone. There was perhaps a touch of curiosity about the expression on his face... an eagerness to go to the edge and even beyond... of course boys of his age have not lived long enough to appreciate

the loss of their lives... when he fell, soundless, the dagger thrust through the chest, blood trickling from his lips, the sickness left me with a terrible suddenness and I was overcome by shame. A shame not of what I did and did not do, a shame of what I was, and have been, all my life. I watched in shame as the others went to their fate, one after another, following the example set by their brother, all of them quiet and willing, without tremor, without reproach... my two little toddlers thought it was a game and the last was still a babe... he was carried in the arms of a soldier, stabbed and flung at my feet...

By then I was lost to feelings... I watched numb, from far away the emptiness that swallowed up all that was my life. I could scarcely hear the wailing of their mothers who I knew would curse me all their lives.

The red hot iron spike closing in on my face, brought me back to my senses for a panic stricken moment, but the pain in the eyes was too great to bear... and I lost, at once, all consciousness.

On the long journey here to Babylon the sharp needles endlessly probing my eyes drove me insane... I kept thinking that I still had eyes... and all I wanted was to rip the eyeballs out... I could not believe my fingers as they kept returning to hollow cavities instead... it was then that I cried out to God, cried out and begged Him to take away my life... I prayed every tortured step of the way from Jerusalem, as I have never prayed before, to have an end...

And there was no end, no end to the pain, no end to my life. But I knew nothing about prayer then... I had not yet understood that it is no good asking God for some particular thing in the despairing need of a here and now... He is not that kind of God... He is not within that kind of easy, instant reach...

Here, in prison, with the help of delicate ointments, the juice of assorted cacti leaves and the finest healing concoctions Babylon could supply, the pain finally eased. After a year or so, I was, in body, more or less restored.

Then, with the pain gone, came the grief. I had the time to mourn at leisure all that I had lost.

Reduced to memories, I noted the houses, gardens, furnishings, robes, carriages, horses, idols and other playthings I once had called my own and found, in not having them, there was not a great deal to mourn... I counted the women in my life and fondled each one once more in a tender and lascivious embrace... only to discover that I loved too many to miss any single one of their delightful company... I called on my friends... but then kings have so precious few and even those, I could never be sure if they were my friends or just friends of the king... I re-enacted the excitement of the great affairs of state and basked once more in the adulation of an ordinary royal day... but truth to tell, being king had always been for me more of a burden than a

joy. I had to admit that I never gained the respect of those men that mattered to me most.

Of course, I cried over the boys... dry tears, you understand, for eyeless men produce no comforting flow... each one of them so brave, each one a king of promise, a much better king than I... their un-lived lives grew into so wild a sorrow in my heart that, for a while, my wretched heart was near ready to break. Eventually this sorrow became my second nature... the sad colour and texture of my thought..

It was only then that I had the strength to contemplate what men usually consider their greatest loss. I am told it is not the missing of the beauty of roses that makes the abrupt onset of blindness so hard to bear. It is more practical than that... not seeing your face in the mirror... or the food you are eating... the stones on the road ahead... the faces of strangers who address you... as for me, I was spared the initial frustrations. I was in too great a pain at the time to feel sorry for myself. Well before I was finally obliged to confess to being blind, I had learnt to live, and get by with what I could touch, hear and smell... in any case, living in prison, there isn't here much to please the eye.

But beyond all that, when I first dared to pronounce to myself those terrible words: I shall never ever again see anything at all in the whole wide world, to my astonishment, I felt no regret, no hurt. There was simply no desire in me to look around, to search outside for a new wonder, a wonder I had never seen before.

What followed, I remember with painful clarity, was a time of acute loneliness. The guards, simple, well meaning fellows, are helpful and treat me well. They bitch about the service, complain about their wives, tell ribald tales and regurgitate court gossip - all of which leaves me cold, untouched.

As for the Jews, my countrymen have left me severely alone. Those in high positions, and many have risen fast, disdain failure and won't have anything to do with a has-been. The rest are too insecure to draw attention to themselves... a prison to a man condemned for treachery, does nobody any good... I lived a public life...I spent all my time, day, evening and night, in company... to be so utterly alone, with nothing to do, with no one to meet, day after interminable day, ground me down into a thousand grey, dusty particles of despair...

The only relief, the only entertainment in my life, was provided by the rare occasions, when, like today, I was put on show. The first few times I felt deeply humiliated... kneeling... in chains... fed on barbed whispers, derisory laughter, wounding words, spit in my face... but I soon realised it was only a performance devised by Nebuchadnezzar for the benefit of a captive audience... with me leading the cast... what makes me smile nowadays, is that he is so unaware that his little scene belongs altogether to another play, written for both of us by someone far above, someone without any constraint..."

The last king of Judah reaches out to me and draws me close. With the perceptive fingers of the blind he brushes lightly the features of my ageing face and pressing them on my neck, measures the fear coursing through my veins. What is left for him to say, he imparts in an inspired, conspiratorial voice:

“In the silence of my cell, in the stillness of my misery, I began hearing my voice calling aloud to me. I was trying to find answers to questions set by myself.

At the beginning there were many questions, all unconnected. They had nothing in common except that I could answer none of them. In the end, they all merged into one obsessive quest.

Why me? Why of all kings of Judah and Israel have I been singled out to carry the burden of the destruction of Jerusalem? What monstrous wrong have I done, to lose my kingdom, my sons, my freedom... my sight? Where was the iniquity that called forth so hideous a punishment?!

I had sinned gravely as a king and surely sinned abundantly as a man. But I searched in vain to find a sin of mine worthy of a retribution such as that. This one question, never answered, repeated without end, burnt a tormenting circle in the arid landscape of my dying mind. There was nowhere for me to go, nothing more to do, no thoughts, no desire left...

And then, in the middle of an ordinary, sleepless night, long after I thought I had given up, without any warning, with no premonition, for no reason, there came a light... and in that light, flickering between the outer darkness and the one within, suddenly I began to see...

My sufferings were no condign punishment for some monumental, uncommitted sin... it is puerile, presumptuous to think of God as some kind of accountant, doling out an exact measure of retribution for every sin...

I lost my eyes because having them I was not able to see...

He took away everything I had, not in revenge, but to draw me near... just as He destroyed the temple and Jerusalem not for our multiple and manifold wrongs but because they were in the way... because they had become a barrier between the chosen people and their most insistent God.

Without a temple, a city, a country of our own, we are, perhaps, free once again to come back to Him.

The light became luminous and in that luminous light I saw at once that He chose me to be the last king of Judah, to be the exemplary victim of His dreadful judgement, precisely because I had been such a nonentity.

Against all reasonable expectation He raised me, a man of no talent, no strength, no leadership, He raised me from insignificance to the summit of our history. In that luminous light my life in Jerusalem seemed not to make much sense and appeared

doomed to a well deserved obscurity. What gave it meaning, the only meaning it could ever have, was its awesome end. What happened then, what I went through since, all the pain, the grief, the dread, were not for nothing. They brought me home, home into His presence once more.

I am no prophet, you understand, I have no privileged access to the Lord, I speak of no startling revelations... I am still a failure of a king, bound in these accursed chains, the sad object of pity and ridicule... but I am not afraid, I am not in despair and I am no longer alone.

You may dismiss what I now tell you as the hallucinations of a feeble, broken old man, conjured up to ease his last remaining days... as comforting delusions to justify a bitter fate... but I know I do see the light, I know He is with me, not always but some of the time, I know He is the one and only God and all the rest are a waste of time.”

There are a great many questions I want to ask, but the lips of Zedekiah are now sealed in an unworldly smile and his transported face turns away from me, turns towards a distant port.

In any case I cannot linger on here, the hunting horn has sounded and I am called to horse.

CHAPTER XVI

THE HUNT

The hunting horn has sounded, we gather in the forecourt of the inn.

Clad in handsome leather boots, dressed in black and pink, whip in hand, we are ready for a brotherly round of fortifying drinks. Only the horses are missing, we are going to ride another kind of steed.

Keeping each other in sight, we fan out across the dense, primeval woods. We hunt in loose packs, this is strictly not an individual pursuit.

It is not long before we come upon a spoor. We bend down to sniff knowingly a vegetation marked by wanton female scent. A trail of fresh prints inscribed on the damp moss, draws us ever deeper into the uninhabited heart of the dark evergreens.

The tell tale rustle of autumn leaves brings the first glimpse of our quarry, moving softly and at speed. Through the heavy foliage of hemlock trees we spy, in passing, the white of a shoulder, a leg, a fleeting breast, a vanishing thigh.

Rivals, now at a gallop, each of us competes to be first and to claim the prize. Close on her heels, with rising passion we feast our eyes on the sensual sights presented by a well formed woman, naked, in full flight. Strong, sculpted calves. A pliant, firm, undulating behind. Breasts swaying sweetly, face replete with delicious fear.

Closing in, we pick up the quiver of her breathing and discern the satin coat of sweat that covers her shimmering flesh. Twisting and turning her head in panic, she runs through brier and bramble, stumbles over exposed roots, falls, scrambles up, runs a few steps, falters and is finally brought down in the coils of a curling whip.

The whip is not mine. It belongs to a grim man who does not aim to please. Having brought her down, it is he who will consummate the chase. The rest of us, an envious semicircle on his flanks, watch intently and support the action with a dissolute rendering of the anthem of the hunt.

On her back, pinned gently to the forest floor, those desirable, unresisting legs forced wide apart, the captured female waits. Her new owner mounts in slow motion, imposing upon her panting heart the measure of his own time. He rides with an easy authority, poised and erect, restraining her movements to the behest of his will. He spurs her on, then reins her in, lets her race, then makes her stay completely still.

Wresting from her throat sounds of pleased pain, he repeats the exercise again and again, until she is well and truly trained. Satisfied, he places a halter round her neck and leads the tamed captive away, whilst we, yet to succeed, are left to resume the chase.

Not being particularly fast, nor adept with the whip, I have to witness many other such triumphs in the eager, apprehensive expectation of a capture of my own. No matter, more and more of my fellow hunters are sate and there are enough unbridled women in the woods to vouchsafe each one of us a turn.

The one that falls to me has the conventional beauty of a previous generation. Dark haired, demure and of ample proportions, she reminds me of someone I saw once in an old family album, bathing on a beach. She yields with fearful alacrity at the whistling of my whip and gives me a ride full of promise. Promise of a perfect unison to come.

Emboldened by such supine obedience, I look down, straight into her distracted eyes. And in those eyes I seem to recognise a hurt which goes way back, deep into the past. Whilst still riding hard, I now find a shadow of compassion, a faint doubt, an unwelcome companion to my resolve.

Whereupon I note a subtle shift in our relationship. What has been such a perfect fit between us, the tight, pleasurable play of our complementary moves, is no longer so. I am not filling her completely any more. There is a void that was not there before. Pressing on, I think it odd and dismiss it as a local phenomenon of a transitory sort.

But then, unbelieving, I sense a change that is much more serious. She has started to grow at an alarming rate. Or maybe it is I who am shrinking terrifyingly fast. I cannot determine which, but it does not matter, the result is horribly the same.

The transformation is sudden, chilling, leaving no chance to escape. Unable to dismount, I cling for a while on a giant alabaster breast. My diminishing hands tire, I slip down a vast expanse of smooth white skin to be caught in a black forest of hairs, at the mouth of a pink crevasse, between two mountains of living, unclimbable flesh.

A pause. Time to catch my breath after the breathtaking events just past. Time to try to find myself in such an unaccustomed size, a paltry body wandering dazed in surroundings of a monstrous depth. Moving tentatively among curling, unlimbed, black trunks of hair, I see no obvious path, no trace of previous men having ventured this far.

No wind, no wildlife. All is silent except for a contralto voice humming a melody reminiscent both of a dirge and a lullaby. The ground is treacherously soft. A sickly sweet perfume wafts in periodic waves over the whole countryside. The place is altogether strange. It is also disturbingly familiar. I feel I have been here once before, that I ought to know the place and yet I cannot find my way.

I am lost. There ought to be a path. A path leading forward and back, up and down, in and out. Half believing I have a choice, I try, despite the constraints of the terrain, to move forward, to struggle up, out of that unhealthy climate, out into the open, into daylight, into the fresh air. But even as I struggle, I know, as men doomed always know, that I struggle in vain. I am drawn by the gravity of a nameless compulsion, by ancient spells that take precedence over my will, I am drawn, still struggling, into that famous, repulsive, seductive, pink crevasse.

The walls of my precipitous descent are lined with mucous membrane. Helplessly I slither down steep slopes of well lubricated organic tissue. There is nothing to grasp, no foothold, no stopping anywhere. As my course gathers pace my stomach rises to my throat, my heart is in my mouth and the eyes of my mind see my body falling into a bottomless pit. This, of course, makes no sense because, though panicking, I am still sane enough to know there can be no such thing. It is the spectre of what lies at the bottom of the bottomless pit that raises such a childish paradox.

As a matter of fact I land gently on a corpulent bed of blubbery substance at the base of the deep cleavage and find myself, shaken but unharmed, facing the legendary entrance of the most controversial of caves. Not unexpectedly, a hackneyed hideous old hag is there to greet me and bid me good bye. Wearing a nurse's uniform, covered in warts and islands of facial hair, she acts both as receptionist and guard. Out of her misshapen, toothless mouth a mellifluous voice issues words which may be taken as an invitation, or warning, probably both.

"Welcome home, stranger. We have been expecting you for quite a while. By the looks of it, you have ranged far and wide. You must be weary of the road, tired of travel. Time to call it a day, isn't it? You have tried so hard, attempted so much, God knows suffered enough to have earned a respite, to merit a rest.

Well, from hereon inwards you leave behind your cares. You need struggle no longer. You may shed the heavy load. No more work. No hassle. No pain.

You will find everything is taken care of. We are generously staffed, marvellously well equipped. You will be looked after in every respect. All your vital needs will be satisfied. You will be treated like a long lost prince come to claim his inheritance. All is ready, all is set."

I wish I had come to this foreboding place out of my own volition. Wrapped in protective armour, defended by a sword whose blade was forged in a bloody battle I won. Or, at the very least, in full possession of the ancestral secret to divine for myself some future of a viable sort.

As it is, I come not as an aspiring hero, well prepared and well attired. I am here on summons, my homework is not finished. I am naked. I have no choice.

The flesh pink portals open to suck me in of their own accord. On the inside, a pair of strong hands lift me gently onto finely calibrated scales. I am to be weighed, plumbed and measured in a fundamental way. As the results are noted without being made generally known, I have no notion for what I qualify, if I qualify for anything at all.

Even so, other hands of equal strength lower me into a tub of ambient liquid and with unscented soap and rough flannel remove the protective accretion of a sinful lifetime from the surface of my skin. Which skin, scrubbed keen and alert, is now wrapped tight in swaddling clothes of gossamer, gossamer spun by a busy spider of mythological descent. Although bandaged into a mummy, I can see the still moving spider because my eyes and the principal orifices of my body have been left deliberately uncovered, to have full and free communion with the outside world.

Thus, I may exercise my lungs at leisure, sipping daintily the dank cavern air. Or, on being surprised, draw in my breath, hold time in suspense and with the danger past, let the stale air escape in one tremendous sigh of unexpected relief.

Thus, I may open my mouth to suck in the sweet and satisfying substance needed for my survival. Or, alternatively, to let out an elemental scream signifying the pain and panic when no sustenance is readily at hand.

Thus, I may, more or less at my discretion, produce works in malleable and pungent material, in varied shapes and sizes, works of my own, despised by some, by others admired.

Thus, I may, with the aid of a memory, actual or imagined, through a rush of blood to a limp and lifeless member, create an uprising that does not last and no longer matters.

What I cannot do is move.

Fingers are not joined and cannot touch. Hands are apart and hold nothing. Arms are pinned down and have no liberty. Legs are bound rigid. They cannot bend, they cannot stretch, they cannot kick, they have no power. And my body, to which they all nominally belong, is phenomenally inert. It cannot turn, or twist, or shift or change its given position.

Somewhere in the distant bowels of the establishment, decisions are being taken, decisions that affect the well being of us all, as we lie in neat rows of secure litters, each one tied to his own defunct umbilical cord.

Volatile creatures of considerable presence are in overall charge. They ration and administer the substance of life. Confined and exposed as I am, they are for me the arbiters of sound, heat, comfort and light. They speak a language which sounds familiar but has no meaning. To my own speech they respond with a lack of comprehension accorded to pure gibberish. And yet even a minor misunderstanding between us

could have an incalculable consequence. A change of a few degrees in temperature may mean being boiled alive or freezing to death. The addition of a decibel or two to the volume of a voice could turn a soothing melody into deafening pain.

The play of light and dark, the two extremities of my wildly oscillating existence, could fashion my life into a noble, uplifting tragedy, or turn it into a common, amusing, farce. It all depends. It all depends on the manner of their succession, on how swiftly, how brutally one gives way to another. It all depends on the shadows of dusk and dawn I encounter in the shifting half-light as I travel to and fro, at varying speeds, from hyper alertness to utter oblivion.

Manipulating, as they do, the grey colours, the air waves of sound, the climate, the supply of all liquid and solid refreshments, these volatile creatures of considerable presence have, in effect, command of my own personal orifices. They sit at every entrance and watch every exit. They decide who and what goes in and out. When they come and when go. And yet all this time all we share between us, is our mutual ignorance. They do not know what is happening to me and I have no idea what they have in mind.

What will happen after I hear the rolling thunder of an approaching storm? The growling of an unchained mastiff, the flapping wings of an unseen bird? The impatient buzz of a poisonous insect in search of a home, the sudden slamming of an angry door, an imprecisely strangulated scream ?

What is to happen when I feel the heat rising in my blood, when the garment which constricts my movement is soaked in sweat? When mouth, tongue and lips are drying fast? When the tight embrace of suffocating care threatens to deprive my lungs of the freedom of the air?

What may happen when a fast returning ice age sends its first shivers through my ill protected body and the little me that is still exposed is beginning to turn blue?

Who will steal into my presence from the deceptive twilight on the ragged edges of sleep, to cast a vague, fine-meshed, malevolent net of terror over my daily ration of laughter and joy? And having so rudely intruded, for how long will this mutilated piece of reality stand over me, mute, unnamed, unwholesome, before dissolving in the corrosive acid of pure fear, to leave behind nothing beyond the foreboding shape of things to come.

As I sense a great growing emptiness in my very middle and the screaming agony brings no sustenance, I question if there will ever again be a time of soporific plenty, of fulsome content.

Forced to swallow arbitrary volumes of gushing matter when my innards are already full, I wonder, oozing from every brimful orifice, if the loving instrument of infusion will be removed before I choke, or gag, or burst.

Inert in the hands of volatile creatures of such an overbearing concern, I am admonished by voices only too familiar, to relax. To lie back and let everything take its natural course. This I cannot do. A desperate sort of curiosity inspires me to resist.

Since I cannot move, I observe.

From my crib I encompass the fine detail of every outside event. Within my body I heed the place, time and intensity of each succeeding sensation. Whatever stuff comes to hand, from within or without, is labelled, logged and laid in store for my own particular use. Mostly, to create scenarios of imminent pain or future release. An itch, a twitch, a tickle in the throat, a loud cough is all it takes a gifted artist, like me, to conjure up a deadly scene. Lurid colours portray an inflamed heart, an imploding, pain filled chest, a fevered, hallucinating head.

For fear, in its pristine state, as an all pervasive, objectless, abiding anxiety, requires but little nourishment. Like desire, it seizes an attractive bit of trivia and from it creates its own awesome reality.

So, turned inward, I lie quietly monitoring the signals of my confined body and design alternate scenes of a slow and painful death.

At the same time, turning outwards, I trace the itinerant moves of the volatile creatures in charge and try to attune my ears to the idiom of their speech. Among themselves they use the parlance of the workplace. Words ride actions, there is gossip and giggle and shrill exclamation when something out of the ordinary brings them into clusters of cruel curiosity. Dealing with us hardly any words are spoken. The few that occur are disjointed, diminutive expressions of pleasure and displeasure. All we get from them are primitive, repetitious, meaningless sounds accompanied by odd gestures of hand and transparent grimaces of face. Pursing of lips, raising of eyebrows, baring of teeth, nodding of heads, wagging of fingers, is their entire vocabulary. A vocabulary for us to learn, ponder and elucidate.

By dint of diligent study of the changing light, the regulating of the climate and feeding orders, I am beginning, slowly, to establish some order out of the intolerable chaos of this capricious universe. That is to say, I am now suspicious. I no longer trust the volatile creatures in charge. I fancy I know what they are up to.

For starters, there is no equality, no fairness within the place. We are not treated the same. All these measuring, weighing, taking of temperature are not just routine safeguards taken for the benefit of our wellbeing. Their results are not merely recorded as marks of our general ease and degree of contentment. I have come to believe we are being rated. Graded, classified, streamed, differentiated.

I note with some concern that despite the clinical pretence, the monitoring of our progress is not a matter of cool, professional indifference. By means of a highly specific dispensation of light and sound, the composition and dosage of

nourishment, the variable quality and quantity of tender care, we are encouraged to fulfil expectations. Their expectations ! That is what it is all about, that is what they cannot hide, that is what gives the game away. If we fall below them they are fussed, worried and depressed. If we excel they are all agog, excited and disturbed. Only if we are compliantly precise and conform, do they exhibit the benevolent signs of kindness, love and warmth.

So is the conspiracy conceived. The conspiracy between their well documented expectations and our nascent script. They chart the land, we stray beyond. We stray beyond, they are distressed. They are distressed, we suffer. We suffer, we return. We return, they are pleased. They are pleased, we learn to stay. To stay within these arbitrary boundaries. A self-fulfilling prophecy. In perpetuity.

But if we are so jealously classified, so categorically split, I conclude there must be orders, divisions, casts. Inevitably, there must be hierarchies. From my poor vantage, after much thought, I have identified, so far, alarmingly, only four.

Those fated to a lifetime of labour form the working majority. For the present, like the rest of us, they lie of course inert. But all the time, in their unobtrusive way, I know they are accumulating raw energy. Reared in the constant light of middle grey, fed to the tune of a metronome, sheltered from undue excitements, they are impervious to monotony, proof against boredom. Strong, plump, curved in the female form, I surmise they will adapt, endure and always provide the wherewithal.

Much, much fewer are intended for war. Kept mostly in the dark, these innocent recruits are spasmodically exposed to brilliant lights, revealing in a flash odd bits and pieces of an unpredictable reality they will never, ever grasp. Having been nurtured on an irregular diet of hunger and martial airs, I predict these dormant soldiers will not doubt, nor question, nor hesitate to fight. They are a breed well prepared to die.

Then there are the chosen ones, each true and sufficient unto herself. These rare individuals are so archetypal, so precious, so independent that they can hardly be considered as part of a group. Lavishly supplied with all that is pleasant, nourishing and sweet, bathed in a permanent warm light, soothed by infant melodies, each one is already a centre of attention. They are significantly larger than the rest and I have no doubt every one of them is destined to be a queen.

The rest, the leftovers, those who are not meant to be workers, soldiers or a queen, are moribund. A certain air of negligence, a want of interest, a lack of expectation by the powers that be, suggests to me that those so classified are being eased on their way. Allowed to lapse. Cease altogether to be.

So what about me ? Where do I belong ? Given the simple, stark distinction of each fate, what kind of life is left for my remaining days ?

Not surely that of worker, soldier or a queen.

Not worker because I live for the exception, not the rule, because my calendar is made up exclusively of Sundays and high holidays, because my coat is multi-coloured and I have devoted myself to playing and winning games.

Not soldier because I am singularly ill prepared to die, because I doubt and question everything in sight, because I shall always find good reasons to forego, to postpone any and every fight.

Not queen because I have no desire to be worshipped, courted and adored. Because I am not self satisfied enough to clone myself a thousand fold. Because I am too restless to remain in one place whilst the rest of the world revolves.

Moribund then ? Among those already discounted, written off, ignored? No, I am too afraid to believe this is the end of all possible roads.

But if there are only four kinds of beings and I am none of them, I am unique. There can be no other conclusion: I must be king!

Even if these administering angels do not know it, even unannointed, uncrowned, unacknowledged, still, I must be a king.

For only a king is subject to no order, no category, no law. He may chose to work or laze, or run away to fight another day. He may sire bastards or princes or bequeath history in any other, accidental mode. And having chosen right or wrong, he still retains the absolute right to reign.

Even so, I shall be lord of nothing but the tormenting realm of my own impotence, unless those in charge bow deep and salute my royalty. Yet they, dedicated nurses all, are oblivious to the notion of a monarch who is a male.

How, I ask myself, lying constrained, immobile, helpless in a regulation crib, can I inform these pointless creatures of the norm, that they are nurturing the rightful heir to a long lost throne? Having no language they can understand, no birthmark to validate my claim, no arms free to raise in command, no voice of authority to overrule the crowd, it seems impossible to communicate the presence of a king.

I am desperate. I shall not be worker, soldier, or a queen. I have no wish to be moribund and die prematurely an unnecessary death

In my desperation I am forced to act.

To begin with I refuse all nourishment. And when they try to squirt milk into my mouth, I bite the nipple and fly into a right royal rage. I scream and choke and breathe neither in nor out, so that my blood turns a deep shade of purple, so that the veins on the temple throb and bulge.

There is consternation all about. The creatures of great magnitude run round in diminishing circles of confused concern. They flap their wingless limbs to stir the futile air. Plainly, they cannot cope.

Assistance is called for and comes in the shape of three distinguished men studiously dressed in clinical white. They gather knowledgeably at the foot of the crib. I greet them with a cascading shower of pale gold liquid which turns in mid-air to paper money and lands, still moist, on their unprotected heads. And whilst they are still busy deciding whether the notes are genuine or fake, I unleash a concert of furious, thundering farts to send a strong signal that I am very much alive and have readied my bowels to move.

With their attention captured I summon the remnant of my will, set to work and produce a range of fantastic pieces of astonishing shit. Individually sculpted, each one is an original creation of passing beauty and inestimable worth. The colours are rich, the textures voluptuous and the meaning obscure. Obscure enough to call for conflicting interpretations. Obscure enough to excite academic debate. Obscure enough to create controversy.

The three experts are impressed. They look, walk slowly around and take differing views. They sniff, consider and debate. They scrutinise, re-examine and form firm opinions. They disagree, argue and grow passionate. They point, gesticulate and come to theoretical blows.

In the end they conclude nothing except that matters cannot remain unresolved. There has to be further in-depth research. Therefore I am to be unwrapped. My bandages are to come off. My arms are to be unpinned, my legs unbound, my body free to move, to move at will.

Nothing is resolved. I have not been proclaimed king. I am still pending. I am still under investigation. But I am on my own feet again, slowly and painfully working my way out of a distant past that held me in a lifetime bond of love and deadly affection.

I ride back not a conquering hero, brandishing the spoils of war. I limp along bearing nothing but my open wounds to show that I have been where man is forbidden to go.

I cannot foresee my fate, but I have done just enough to show that I, not only they, will have in it, a say.

CHAPTER XVII

THE KABUKI THEATRE

On the outskirts of puberty, along with other boys of my age, I am kneeling in the assembly hall of an exclusive public school. The traditions of the school date back to the Genroku era of our history.

It is the first day of our first term. The new intake of boys is listening with well concealed apprehension to the induction speech of the headmaster, delivered along these lines :

“I very much hope that none of you presumes that he was admitted to the school on his own merit. True, you have all shown some aptitude for acting. But then is there anyone in the world who cannot act a little, enough anyway to get by. No, you, the chosen ones, are here principally thanks to your families. Each one of you owes a great measure of gratitude to his ancestors who have distinguished themselves in our difficult profession.

So if, eventually, some of your performances will please the audience, their applause belongs not to you as an individual but to the family that encouraged your acting and made you, as an actor, at all possible.

Now, in the nature of things, you will spend your lives masquerading as heroes. It cannot be helped because the lives you will act out were lived by the true nobility. They lived in the distant past when it was still possible to draw a clean and simple line between virtue and vice, between the great and the puny, loyalty and treason, courage and cowardice. An age when the valiant was pure and there were no shades of evil. To take on the appearance of such exalted characters, to recount in words their adamantine deeds, to impersonate any one of them, is a form of sacrilege. And as with all such sacrilege, there will have to be an appropriate punishment. This, again, cannot be helped. All you can do is to mitigate the circumstance.

You cannot ever be forgiven for pretending to be someone other, someone superior, to yourself. But if you do it well, if you are convincing in the part, the retribution will be less severe .

You will aim for perfection and I shall make it painful for you to settle for less.

Ahead of you are years of study, unending practice and daily exercise to modulate

a voice, acquire a gait, develop a body language and train facial muscles to display vernacular feeling and hidden thought. Make good use of the brief time you have here. Master the character. Nobody deserves or gets a second chance.

On stage you will of course wear a mask at all times. The mask is not there to hide you. As far as the audience is concerned there is no one behind the mask. As for you, you will become the mask. This is the school's curriculum. When the mask and you are one and the same, you shall be ready to leave and face the world on your own."

Class dismissed.

For many months we sit, still kneeling, at the feet of arcane masters of the art, listening, observing, admiring but not taking part.

Of all stereotypes taught, by far the most popular is that of the Samurai. Boys being boys, we go for the strutting stride, pent-up aggression, the heavy silence preceding the play of swords.

Every step, every gesture, every look must convey the life of the Samurai, which is acutely balanced on the cutting edge of his own curved blade. His calm assurance signifies that when called upon he will not be afraid to die. Resolution is in the deed, never in words, no matter how fine. Words invite, punctuate and lament the action but for the Samurai they pollute the innocent scent of fresh blood. Hence every syllable is dragged forcibly from the belly in a reluctant, tormented voice. It takes years of assiduous practice to cultivate such a voice, a voice that only utters words it would prefer to have left unsaid.

Also in favour is the typecast feudal Lord. He sits relatively high on elevated chairs to dispense death with imperious gesture, in commanding tones. But for us boys at a critical age, it is not nearly demanding enough to just sit around, take decisions and inspire terror in the surrounding countryside.

The cast below those of Lord and Samurai, functionaries of more or less high rank, is secretly despised. This is hardly surprising since they spend an inordinate amount of their time learning to bow in exquisite nuances all the way from the neck down to the ground. As for their dialogue, it is equally narrow in scope and limited in extent. Almost invariably their response is to a higher authority and is restricted to a single bark. "Hai" is the sound they make, which in a more indulgent language signifies: "I am alert, I understand, I will do exactly what's ordered, I am always ready to serve."

Then there are, of course, the female models about whom we boys are so naturally ambivalent: the old one from whence we all derive and the young one we all desire. Some of us, like it or not, are destined to impersonate both.

Although far from prepossessing, the old dame immediately attracts our attention and always succeeds in holding it fast. Her enigmatic figure meanders darkly behind the performing, predictable men. She strokes their manly ambition and sets ablaze

their childish dreams with the pulsating movement of her enchanted fan. She is the only source of hidden family histories which underlie the entire convoluted plot. And she is the one who eventually unveils the secret that incites the next generation's bloody feud. Dual to her core, she loves, protects and comforts, while spinning a web to capture, enmesh and destroy those she cherishes most.

But, at the very age when we are dying to suspend disbelief, what we find truly striking is her ability to take on such a rich variety of different organic forms. She may appear as a vixen, or in the guise of a wise old bird. She may inhabit a black cat or haunt the night as an unfamiliar ghost. She can be an angel just as easily as a toad. A character given to such a wide variety of accomplishments demands a ruthless temperament. And a voice of exceptional register, reaching across several octaves. A voice moving from a drone bass to a high falsetto, with remarkable ease.

Still, it is the young lady's performance that is the highlight of our student day. We sit spellbound as she describes, in terms of her own undulating movements, the all too brief life of an unfaithful butterfly. On polychrome wings of oriental rapture she flits from one love smitten prince to another, leaving in her wake a dangerous trail of futile desire to have for keeps the kind of passion and beauty that is the exclusive property of perishable youth.

When forced from flight by insensitive, prosaic men, she walks the boards in tiny, rapid, mincing steps to show how she is shackled. Shackled to home, hearth and domestic bed. And besides, it would be in bad taste, in the ordinary course of every day to have her legs regularly open wide, when such immodesty is reserved for a very special occasion.

In keeping, the hands are mostly hidden and when visible are still or move slowly in graceful arcs of becoming modesty. The head, sweetly poised, inclines at submissive angles to accompany song, poetry or speech of beguiling politeness.

The lady's mouth is a veritable spring of soft words, gushing in fragrant spurts from a pair of docile, accommodating lips. The voice, promising secret trysts in the foreseeable future, is not one of the many voices overheard in the marketplace. It is a voice full of music yet of a range beyond the scale of musical convention. It is a voice of melodious resonance we all had heard once, falling asleep for the very first time. A voice that sends every one of us into his own favourite dream, bewitched, bewildered.

But before any words are spoken and before the instruments of music are tuned to play, we see a new dance performed by the young lady every single solitary working day. Her dance may tell a story, or invoke the spirit of the dead, or be a prayer to a lover who is not a lover yet. In her moving she may whirl in slow circles close to the floor, leap lightly into the air or hardly move at all, but convey her meaning merely in the coded language of an exquisite fan. A fan well rehearsed. Whatever the dance, in

her presence we, the boys of the first form, are excited, embarrassed and deliciously confused.

After a period of being all ears and eyes, we are permitted at last to rise from our knees and begin to take part. Eager apprentices, we stumble across the length and width of the stage and try our clumsy, impatient hand at performing every available act. Immature, with absolutely no sense of shame, we attempt vastly different roles, styles in an unholy mixture of plays.

We are tachiyaku in all parts that are male and oyama in all parts that are female. If heroes, we may be supermen, handsome lovers or martyrs to the clan. If villains, we appear as arch-sinners, inveterate rogues, small time crooks and naughty clowns who challenge authority, without suffering the cost. When heroines, we pretend to be courtesans, wives, mothers, princesses, witches and take on roles of noble victims of cruel circumstance.

We adopt, at random, the whole gamut of conventional styles, ranging from the soft wagoto, with its sweet, smiling, gentle, silly movements, to the hard-edged aragoto, which is nothing but a raging torrent of arrogance and bombast, extravagant gesture and blood-curling screams to tear the vocal chord.

We play all kinds of plays, in no particular order. They are all historical, repeating established racial, tribal and family patterns. They are all traditional in their themes. Love, unconditional and unrequited. Filial duty and parental betrayal, parental sacrifice and filial spite. Struggle for power, tyranny, murder and revenge. Revenge against others, revenge against one's self. They are all also original because the outcome of every play remains uncertain to the very end.

Within the space of three years we learn to walk, to speak and dress ourselves.

The syllabus is clearly set out, the time-table is precise, discipline – severe. The school is well organised. And yet, and yet, our education follows no linear path. It proceeds promiscuously, by chance perceptions and brief encounters, one or two at a time.

Despite the rules and regulations we mimic ferociously anything and anybody within our adolescent reach. We copy without scruple our masters and elders in all that they do and acquire thus astonishingly fast theatrical skills to a sadly imperfect degree.

So, now we cover the ground upright in a wonderful variety of unmeasured steps. We toddle, we tiptoe, we flounce, we march, we hop, skip and jump, we stroll, saunter, strut and swagger, we hurry and jog and run impatiently towards a future, still so very promising.

So, now we speak in a manifold plurality of acquired voices. We mutter, we gabble, we murmur and whisper, we whine, hiss and squeal with innocent pleasure, we sob

with guilty tears, we roar and thunder, exclaim and declaim, we orate, perorate, recite and lecture an audience we still believe is there to be captured.

So, now we wear a rich assortment of elaborate costumes and discover the mysteries of tying and untying the Obi knot. We appear in white when engaged in mourning but conceal our white robe of death under other garments on dangerous mission. The colours of our kimonos betray age, gender and rank. Dark browns and greys serve to highlight the brilliant pinks, reds, oranges and purples. They in turn yield to blood coloured scarlet embroidered on a majestic cloth of gold.

Most of the time we are clad in armour. A breastplate to shield our still tender hearts. Shoulder pieces of lacquered, laced plates which leave the arms free to shoot arrows into the air and wield a sword against friends, relations and enemies that may not ever come. A skirt of overlapping shells of rawhide to protect the ever so delicate nether flesh. A helmet of heavy metal adorned with gilded horns as a mark of distinction for an already overburdened head.

Slowly, we become accustomed to wearing a mask. The mask is not any more a separate object of exquisite craftsmanship, held at a respectful distance from the hidden face. It is the make-up of the face itself, created to obliterate all personal traits and reduce facial expression to a single, simplified emotion. With a slim, indelible brush we paint on a flat white base lines of bright colour for joy and loyalty, stripes of blue for calm, sadness and melancholy, deep etched furrows of indigo for terror, rage and villainy.

We play with knives, daggers and curved swords of mitigated sharpness. We toy with folding fans made of a special thick paper. In our playful hands the fan may become an ever turning wheel, a fluttering leaf or a flying saucer, the unruly, rushing wind, waves of a turbulent sea or anything at all that takes our fancy.

We come and go unaided, make an untold number of grandiose entrances and histrionic exits, and striking a suitable pose, we elicit from an already expectant audience, approval, applause and adulation.

Sadly, our multiple accomplishments are infantile. They are but rudimentary fakes of the real art. In the space of three long years all we have learnt are the preconditions of a theatrical life. We are dimly, painfully aware what it will take to move, to speak, to act, to perform on a proper stage. A stage where questions of life and death are decided.

In these elementary years, we are granted the freedoms only available very early in life. Due allowances are made in respect of our noviciate. But there is not a single activity of ours which is not strictly supervised.

Our laughter is noted, our tears are recorded on pages of smudged ink. The way we smile, hold a cup when drinking tea, stamp an angry foot, enunciate each newly

acquired word, are all monitored with undue attention and exaggerated care. Our manner and movement are watched by appraising eyes. Our gossiping voices are intercepted by critical ears. Our feeble attempts at acting are sternly scrutinised. The development of our growing bodies are kept under close review. The quantity and disposition of adipose tissue, the relative delicacy of the bone structure, muscular strength and nervous energy are of particular interest. They are especially on the look out for revealing signs of suspect tendencies.

For the crucial selection is fast approaching and the masters wish to be well informed. They will want to weigh each destiny on the precision scales of a clear-cut gender. Because there is no room for ambiguity. Because the parting is final. Tachiyaku or oyama, one cannot act both. Man or woman, one or the other, for the rest of one's acting life.

Just how the decision is taken is never divulged. Many a claim is made, many a pupil advances his own plausible idea. Whispers are current. Conjecture abounds.

As in all educational establishments, masters have favourite pupils and pupils worship one or another master. Masters indulge and persecute their favourites. Pupils ape and envy their idols.

There is just one certainty: it is the masters who decide and they, between themselves, are divided. Tachiyaku and oyama, male or female. What is my bent ? Whose favourite am I ? Who is my secret idol ? Who shall I try to please in these last feverish moments ? What possible difference will this make ? I do not have the answers. None of us have.

Once a decision is made, it is never officially proclaimed. The fateful judgements, cruelly spaced out, percolate slowly through the school. Our tremulous class is in turmoil.

The tachiyaku become gradually aware of their gender by mere inference. When nothing happens to them they realise, after a while, that they are to be men.

The fate of an oyama is altogether different. His future is revealed not in the abstract form of words. He is forced to learn his transvestite fate through a brutal, if obvious, ritual.

Our dormitory is asleep. Futons aligned, we, the members of the third elementary class, lie still, side by side, somewhere between disturbing dreams and oblivion.

The harsh sound of clashing cymbals hauls me rudely awake. Two files of lanterns are advancing between the futons in the centre aisle. The light of each lantern foreshadows the fully armed figure of a sombre Samurai. Their faces are concealed behind spectacular, evil kumadori masks. The bodies are moving forward with deliberate, extravagant intent.

The lanterns swing and swoop and hover over pale cheeks and blinking, entreating eyes as they seek to single out a boy whose lot, from this night on, is to play strictly female roles.

In the lurid light of a dozen lanterns, cowering under half a blanket, I witness gross and shameful acts committed on the body and mind of a class-mate. No, a friend. No, a half brother. Acts committed in the full sight of a compliant dormitory of silent accomplices.

A mock-solicitous voice, coated in sweet venom, opens proceedings: "Here she is, the lovely, blushing bride... how sweetly her head lies on the pillow... eyes so demurely closed, pretending still to be asleep... come, come my little lady, it is time to open those charming eyes... let them feast on a brave band of eager admirers... let them see what a fine choice you have... twelve such sturdy, fighting fellows, each splendidly equipped to do the job really well... it won't be an easy choice, so you may end up with all twelve!"

Laughter ensues. Not the kind that signals good-natured merriment, but laughter that is compulsory. Laughter that affirms membership of a vicious gang.

With a great show of tenderness the boy is lifted to his feet, undressed and made to pivot naked in the centre of a closed circle defined by a body of lustful men. A flow of remarks and suggestions, oily, sanctimonious, barbed, thickens the air.

"Such neat, tidy little feet.. and narrow ankles... not to speak of deliciously plump thighs, but what are those delicate hands trying to hide ? Her head is drooping so... maybe her dainty neck is too fragile to hold up a head full of fancied men and romantic thought... no, that's not it, she is searching the floor for a pretty comb she must have dropped... do you mean when all that soft, silky hair was so tragically shorn... this close-cropped, boyish style does not suit her at all..."

The circle narrows. The boy is now within range of poking fingers and scabbards housing bloodthirsty swords. Words are reinforced by physical demonstrations on the undefended flesh.

"Perhaps a touch deficient here below the neck... but if you take them well in hand and squeeze hard enough, up come two budding beauties, waiting to be milked... What a fine, well rounded, tight behind... I say it is ripe, perfectly ripe, feel it, feel it, what say all of you ?... Ah, but look, look, what have we got here dangling all nasty up in front, bless my soul if it is not a prick!... Somewhat small and not all that thick, but still an authentic instrument... quite, quite wrong for a lady, such a lovely lady, to have... it's got to come off... now, at once, isn't that so ?"

Murmurs, grunts, exclamations signify a unanimous verdict. The unmistakable sound of a sword being unsheathed, a flashing glint of steel, a horrendous high pitched female scream. An instant of silence, followed by a prolonged outbreak of

confused, relieved hilarity. The communal fear, transformed into lightning, struck only one individual and is now, through the victim, safely earthed.

“No need to be alarmed, my dolly girl, you see the little snake is still here, safely attached, and if you are so attached to him, we won’t take him away... but I am sure you will agree that it is most unseemly for a lady so brazenly to display her lover to the rest of the world. Surely, a modicum of shame won’t be amiss, at least for the sake of good taste.”

An obi string is tied in a noose round the head of the offending length of flesh, which is then pressed hard against the ball bearing sac and pulled back tight between the legs. With the other end of the string drawn between the buttock cheeks and wound into a belt round the waist, all that is visible from the front, is a slight, hair encrusted, disappearing slit.

Thus deprived, head dressed in an elaborate geisha wig, feet thrust in clogs, with only a pretty fan to cover, here and there, his shameful nakedness, my best friend is made to sing and dance the lovelorn scene of a notorious act.

The applause is out of all proportion to the quality of the performance. As concerted hands clap in sarcastic unison, the singing voice falters and the dancing movements stutter to a virtual halt. Yet, again and again, shouts of “Matte imashita” and the prodding points of several swords encourage the performing puppet to go on and on.

“Matte imashita, Matte imashita, Matte imashita” becomes a ribald, rhythmic chant of repeated bravos that keeps driving on the show. With its cessation the whole act comes to an abrupt end. The budding actor is then forced to take a quadruple bow, curtsying deeply to his tormentors in the East, the West, the South and the North.

Silence. No words, no poetry, no music, no song. The silence is not one of tranquillity and peace. It is a pause for the gathering of forces before the final scene.

Movement. A futon is brought to the centre of the ring. Cushions are piled on top of each other and my best friend is stretched face down, over them. A Samurai foot holds down each of his wrists and each of his ankles. The legs are wide apart, the back is arched up, the vulnerable arse-hole is stretched to receive what’s coming.

The first of the Samurai lays down his sword, removes his armour, lifts his kimonos and kneels down with some deliberation right behind his trembling prey. The back of his bulky figure still draped in loose robes, is interposed between me and the prone, naked figure. I am left to surmise what follows mostly from the sounds that emanate from those that participate, willing and unwilling, in a nasty act.

A piercing cry. Grunts. Short shrill screams in quick succession. Heavy breathing. Air drawn in, air heaved out. In and out, louder and faster. Soft cries that turn into sobs. Sobs. Sobs that turn into whimpers. Prolonged whimpers. Bellows. Shouts,

deep and triumphant. Sighs, exhalations, exclamations, ejaculations of truncated words, out of context, deprived of meaning.

The sounds come to me in waves, they mount and ebb and mount again. And every time they rise, the agonising peak feels closer. The cries and moans and sobs merge into a sonic stream of pain that is now not pure innocent pain any longer. Something unthinkable is happening to him who has been my closest friend. Something that I dare not put into words. Something that will change us, something that cannot be reversed.

For the two voices, dissonant at first, in the final moments, are somehow, strangely, orchestrated. There is a complicity, albeit forced, between them.

A final thrust, a shuddering roar, a long lingering moan and it is all over. Except that a second Samurai takes his place and the entire act is repeated. Then comes the third, the fourth and I don't know how many more because I have withdrawn into my body, under the blanket, eyes shut tight, ears well covered.

Morning. The dormitory stirs. We, the boys of the third elementary class, get up, wash, dress, fold our blankets and exercise. Same as ever. All is as before. But more subdued. And there is no talk. And we do not look each other in the eye. And, for the time being, we all avoid crossing the path of the one whose oyama future has just been, so spectacularly, launched.

Night again. But the dormitory is not altogether still. Blankets keep moving and under them uneasy bodies lie astir. There is too much coughing, sneezing, farting and traffic to the bog. Stage whispers, directed at a neighbour but meant for the audience as a whole. Jocular remarks about senior students, Samurai and ghosts are gratefully received but do not reassure at all.

We all know that what we have witnessed the night before will be repeated again and again. What we do not know is when and who will be in the lead role.

Tossing and turning on my futon, I travel in acute discomfort between two fearful states: falling laboriously asleep and being jerked in panic awake. Going back and forth several times, I have the leisure to consider the fine detail of my body, my manner of acting, my school career and my impending fate. Going over each suspect particular, in the dark, I suspect what awaits me is a female life. Repeating the same exercise with the lights on, a heroic role seems still possible. Comparing myself to others in the class, I am torn by doubt. I feel the pain of being stretched over both halves of a strictly drawn gender line.

Thus is the night passed, in fear and doubt and hope and precious little sleep. Other nights follow, much the same. Mostly nothing of remark happens, and there is no action to report.

But from time to time, without warning and according to no set pattern, the posse of senior students reappears. In the guise of Samurai, and in their traditional manner, they make sure the boy in question is fully informed. Proceedings vary only on the margins, the fundamentals of the ritual execution are always the same. The taunts are less original, the jokes a little tired, the repertoire of requested songs ever more nebulous. Even though the individual performances of the victims vary markedly, the ceremony of multiple penetration, is strictly observed in every single case.

The haunted look of the initiates gradually fades. For the rest of us, the terror, just grows. Whenever the swinging lanterns throw their searching light on my own pale face, I think my turn has come. And whenever they pass on, I fear my turn has just been postponed.

The eventful night has recurred now a few times. Many a boy who I did not suspect, has been classed in the female set. The number of oyamas has multiplied and is now approaching half the dorm. The nocturnal raids have petered out and I am still a virgin boy. The hope in my heart is beginning to swell. I expand my chest with growing confidence. A great sense of relief, even waves of elation, take over my whole being and threaten to carry me over the edge.

At this juncture, all of a sudden, I am summoned to the Head. This is a formal session of the teaching corps. Tutors, trainers, masters are all there, sitting on raised cushions on a platform slightly above my eyes as I kneel facing them with as much dignity as I can. The headmaster, positioned a notch higher still, speaks to me in a severe, fatherly tone and he obviously speaks in the name of them all:

“After three years of working with a pupil we know him well enough to resolve where his natural inclinations lie, where he will make most of such talents that he may possess, whether he stands a better chance as oyama or as tachiyaku to fully realise himself.

But, in some exceptional cases, fortunately rare, a pupil will show an aptitude and deficiency in both spheres, more or less evenly balanced and it is not possible, even after three years, to decide his future with any degree of certainty.

You are ambitious, single minded, trenchant, combative. On the other hand, you are soft, indulgent and full of fear. You exhibit unmistakable signs of tenderness, affection and sensitivity but you do not seem able to serve and mould yourself to a stronger, superior will.

Strong and fragile, gentle and unyielding, not a woman, not enough a man, you have placed us in a quandary. We have considered your future, given it much time and thought. The staff is divided, the opposing beliefs are firm, they cannot be reconciled.

In these circumstances, with some reluctance, I have decided not to allow you to join either class of the upper school. You will not be trained as oyama and you will not be formed into tachiyaku.

You will have a special syllabus, your own personal time table. You will learn to perform both male and female roles, as time and energy permits. You cannot hope to be as good as the graduates of either set. You will never perform in the great theatres of the capital. But in the provinces, where modest budgets do not allow for many specialists, there is always place for a good all rounder.

It will not be easy, but if you work hard and keep a level head, you might cobble together a decent life.”

Singled out, I lead from hereon a solitary life. I attend selective classes for male and female parts without being part of any class.

It is not that I do not try. I sigh and whisper and sing and giggle and go misty eyed among the girls. I yell and whistle and boast and muck about with the boys. But when the girls go into a huddle, I am not party to the fanciful secrets they love to share. And when the boys band together to go on the warpath, I am left in the rear to guard the vacant space.

My best friend is a friend no more. We still see each other, in some of the oyama classes we both attend, at communal meals and at public venues of all sorts. But each of us now sleeps in his own dedicated private cell. And when, occasionally, we find ourselves alone there is an embarrassment in the air.

To the incident of that night there has been but one single reference. Once, in passing, he mumbled “It was nothing like we could ever have imagined. You’ll never understand. It went beyond pain. It turned me inside out” These words did not impress me at the time but the changes I noticed in him from then on, have stared me in the eye.

In repose his posture is more attentive. His attention rests patiently on other individuals in the cast. Lips poised in an outline of a hesitant smile, he invites them to perform, encourages the flow words, so that fellow actors are allowed to shine on the bright reflections of his own receptive face. He is a standing invitation to a hug, a kiss, maybe a dance, maybe anything.

In movement his body is more fluid. He can now bend, stretch, twist or turn himself into a shape to accommodate the world. With a double jointed back, loose limbs and freely rotating hips he is capable of doing bridges, arabesques and splits, in comfort and with remarkable ease. His touch is altogether lighter, his walk more rhythmic, the gestures more expressive, the manner much refined.

But it is his voice that has altered most. It warms, it comforts, it caresses, it sweetly delivers words that, somehow, everybody wants to hear.

He who was once my best friend stands now centre stage, the chief attraction of an admiring crowd. He is still, he moves, he adapts, he pleases. He loves but he is loved much, much more.

I try my best to emulate, to learn. In the class of the oyamas though, I cannot compete.

Among the tachiyaku I have a slightly better chance. Hanging on grimly, with well rehearsed lies giving me a tow, I just manage to keep up. At least in appearances. My voice, nothing like harsh enough, does still entertain. I lack a firm step but my footwork is nimble and exceedingly fast. As a lover, a poet, a brother betrayed, or any other tragic figure declaiming his fate, although by no means outstanding, I am doing well.

It is the roles of the Samurai that invariably find me out. When it comes to fighting, to risking my life, I disappear, I am just not there. For the sake of the play, the school and my peers in the class, I go through the motions. It is a poor show. I lack conviction, I inspire no fear. The scene doesn't take off. The bloody climax is never reached.

Struggling in the coils of an insidious failure, I have recourse to a new friendship. It is not of course akin to the first friendship of old, which was blessed by a just and fair asymmetry, each friend embracing the vices of the other self. My new friend, a leading light in the tachiyaku class, is more or less in charge. In the parts that matter he is a natural. His bearing, the look in his eye, the slow diction of his deeply pitched voice, confer on him the kind of authority it is hard to defy.

I bask in his shadow, follow his steps, collect his discards and little by little, I cover my weakness with the strength of his act. He in turn laughs at my jokes and derives some satisfaction from the versatility, wit and quick succession of my supporting roles.

So allied and thus protected, by dint of hard work, graft and pretences, fudging the issue, cheating with caution and being very, very clever, I improvise my way through the school to graduate with dubious honours.

A qualified Kabuki actor, with all the right papers, I roam the city in search of a job. No luck. The headmaster is right. There is plenty of work for both men and women who are well specialised. But the doors of the great theatres are closed for those in between, who cannot decide.

I am reduced to a seedy establishment in a mediocre, provincial town. Ill educated, bereft of talent, they appreciate someone like me, who can do most things, at least half well. I have easy access to a great variety of substantial roles and in no time I become a local star of sorts.

The ordinary people of the town come in their hundreds to see me perform. I am, in a rich variety of guises, a young girl desperately in love, her anxious mother scheming to hide her blemished past, the girl's aspiring lover, who is also her brother unbeknownst to himself, the lustful Lord who precipitated the horrifying tale, the Samurai, beholden to no one, whose flashing blade cleans up the mess.

And what these ordinary folk seem to enjoy most is, that I am, single handed, all that disparate lot.

Appearing in front of so undiscerning an audience, I learn that it pays to go over the top. Therefore I exaggerate. When I cry, I inundate my eyes. When I laugh, I roar. All thought goes deep, all action turns frenetic. Any slight gain becomes a glorious victory, the first sign of trouble, a looming calamity. My entries and exits are spectacular. I howl in anguish or I rejoice in tears, I am seldom still and cheap though it be, the audience loves every minute of it.

Year after predictable year goes by. Each one with roughly the same measure of success: tangible, modest, not widespread. The term of my working life is nearing its end. And I am still not resigned to ending it thus.

Time is running out. Options on offer, there are none. My vital resources are diminishing fast. Not knowing what to do, with nowhere to turn, in desperation, I am forced to invent.

And what I invent, is an altogether original theatrical act.

I have always been remarkably diverse, playing with ease just about the part of anyone else. Hitherto I have been restrained. I took just one part on any given night. But now I have lost all inhibition. From hereon I am acting all the parts in the play and I am acting them all, at the same time!

One minute I am a man with a purpose in life, doing the business and holding fast to his right, the next I am a fearful maid, trembling on the edge of an innocent affair. From a cunning old grandam, in the blinking of an eye, I change into a hopeless young lover pining for her love from a distance too far. I am a noble Samurai, and by a quick adjustment of the mask, also his faithless spy. A silent lord astride his subjects, a kimono shed, turns into a helpless, terror stricken child.

The quality of my acting has not improved but the transformation, that is something else. Nobody fathoms how it is done. People are left astounded, rubbing incredulous eyes.

The word travels from mouth to astonished mouth. In their thousands come the crowds from near and far to watch me repeat myself in so many, simultaneous, parts. My fame is made. I am carried in a long delayed triumph to the heart of the capital. Queues stretch for miles outside the theatre which has now become the seat, the palace, the court of my acclaim.

All goes well. The demand for tickets appears impossible to satisfy. The show is not seasonal, not annual. It is permanent. It never closes down.

But the nightly performance is exhausting. My unceasing labours take their toll. I am beginning to feel tired, I age. I age and tire more easily. The show becomes a burden, its juices do not flow. And in the late, late hours, as I remove my mask, in my

dressing room mirror I see a face so drawn and jaded that I find it hard to admit it's my own.

As the repetitive years slide smoothly by, the face in the mirror deteriorates. The features are stiff, the skin is sallow and the light in the eyes is poor. I like the look of it less and less. Occasionally I grimace to try to bring it some life. Mostly I glance away.

Recently, on an unobtrusive night, the face seemed unusually pale. More attentive since, on succeeding nights I find the reflection in the mirror keeps fading by minute but visible degrees. Having no yardstick to measure the change, suspecting my eyesight, doubting if at all there is a change, I decide to employ a make up artists to deal with the mask on my face. No need now to look into a mirror ever again.

For a while my thoughts are put to rest. But my anxiety is not really allayed. A nagging little niggle remains somewhere and festers in the deep. It slowly, steadily grows there into a worry, a preoccupation, an obsession which I cannot bear.

So I am once more seated at my dressing room mirror, peeling off the mask. My eyes are closed, my trembling fingers know their way. I force my reluctant eyelids open and look full square into the mirror, unblinking: I am not there.

The wall behind me, the pictures hanging on it, are all reflected clearly, but nothing of me is visible.

This isn't true. Such things just do not happen. I touch my forehead. Rub my chin. Pinch my cheeks. Stroke my hair. All present. All well. It is just that I cannot see myself. Not in that mirror. Not in any of the other mirrors I rush out to buy.

It takes time to believe the disturbing evidence of my doubting eyes. It takes years to give up the hope for my mirror image to return from its exile.

Especially as my professional life goes on exactly as before. Nobody else is aware of the change, nobody notices anything wrong. The loss is a secret. The secret is strictly my own.

But for me the loss is frightening. I begin to suspect that it has to do with my acting, with the one-man-show. The suspicion grows. It gnaws at my acting, it invades the performance, it makes me ill.

To the sorrow of my fans, and there are still many, I decide to retire. I am an actor no more.

But I cannot give up the theatre. So, with the time left, I am writing a play. The play is for others, not for me, to act. Yet in their performance I shall perhaps, one night, find again, myself.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOURNEY INTO THE INTERIOR

By appointment, at the mouth of my body, I meet a specialist of great repute. He is an acknowledged authority on all matters corporeal. Together we are about to venture on a journey into the interior.

Passing the lips, lips that have always tended to open with loving ease, I take a fond backward look at a fast vanishing world. I would have preferred to stay outside my skin, in superficial touch with pleasant realities.

We clamber up valleys of receding gum and come to the gaunt remains of what was once a rugged set of remorseless teeth. Originally made to tear pieces of raw flesh and crack open hard outer shells, they have been reduced to chewing bread and other sundry sophisticated nourishment. A ramshackle structure, held feebly together by crowns, bridges and fillings of sorts, it bears sad testimony to a life of procrastination, self indulgence and sloth.

Using irregular formations between the gaps we scale the walls to see from close up how matters stand. Here and there my companion stops to tap the surface. Shaking his head he scatters comments as he goes.

“Acid. Nothing like acid to corrode teeth. Enamel and bone cannot withstand its slow, insidious attack. Probably sweets. From a very early age. Continuously. In quantities. And lack of attention, of course. Daily neglect, and neglect over the years. A patchwork of remedial works. Too little, always too late. Then, inevitably, major reconstruction. Quite well done. It should just about last long enough. With a bit of luck.”

Visions of the drill. The date set and deliberately ignored for weeks ahead. The overcast school morning. Lunch subdued. The dismal procession to the place of execution. The dread astride the waiting room. The raised, revolving throne of pain. The inimical sound of the instrument ready to be engaged. The hand with the grey, metallic, vibrating head. Her heavy, white, freckled bosom leaning over my face. The smell of talcum powder. Then the pain. Two kinds of pain. Screaming convulsion of the nerves and anticipated torture of pain still to come.

Yet I went on eating chocolate cakes regardless and let the brush only skim superficially over vulnerable teeth.

Sheltering at the base of a wisdom tooth we observe the gyrations of an absent minded tongue. With the fluid movement of a slow cavorting whale, it works the limited extent of its domain: dome, cheeks, gums and corroded bone. The specialist is quite impressed: "A fine specimen. Quick, smooth, resilient. Firm, pointed shape. The type medieval superstition called the devil's own". Which is appropriate, since its guile oft saved my skin and got me to where I am today.

When the tongue eventually comes to rest, we traverse its moist surface from the tip to the very back. On our way we tarry at some taste buds that litter the terrain. The sweet ones up front, the bitter ones nearer the gorge and those sour and salty in between.

"A sophisticated palate, used to please itself with no regard for the common good. And, of course, no tolerance whatsoever of bitterness." This is all my frugal companion is prepared to say.

On a current of air we filter past the place where once tonsils stood guardians to the entrance of the throat." No tonsils, I note. Why not ?"

On account of my middle ear getting inflamed every childhood winter, when, sliding on ice and rolling in snow, I invariably caught a cold. The long necked Doctor Gollantz, an Egyptian sun disk fastened to his forehead, removed them with a pair of curved, far reaching clippers all those years ago.

Ether-drenched pad over my nose, I counted till seven and woke with a parched, aching, tonsil-less throat, in time to see fractured bits of bodies hastily assemble themselves into smiling little white coated gods. Unadulterated days of ice cream helped to soothe the hurt and provide the promised reward for being brave. The operation having been declared a success, the annual inflammation of the ear with the attendant torture lingered on for a few more years, unchanged.

A rush of turbulent air, warm and humid, carries us past silent vocal chords, glottis and epiglottis, straight down a windpipe, through ever narrowing bronchial tubes, to the outer boundaries of a life giving, ethereal, world.

We drift in primordial scenery. The light is grey, night and day have not been differentiated. The airways of our progress are lined with a spongy membrane that predates the separation of matter into solid, liquid and gas. Thin, porous, insubstantial, these walls are strong enough to withstand the howling wind as it breaks in rhythmic waves against the periodic calm. They yield, they stretch, they expand to accommodate the wind, then collapse with force to expel the invading gale. But the air that departs is not the air that invades. It rides in, bracing and fresh. It retreats, old and stale. It leaves something behind and takes something else, with it, away.

For the other side of the wall is criss-crossed by rivulets of blood. It is the place of the miraculous exchange. Poison of carbon dioxide is bartered for essential oxygen.

Essential because, on the evolutionary scale, the higher the organism, the more desperate is its dependence on fresh air.

“From what I have seen so far, all is well” the reassuring sound of words is welcome even though it holds me still in suspense “Of course we haven’t been all around, but there are virtually no signs of degeneration in the material of the walls. They are obviously not quite so resilient, not so supple as they used to be, but there is no creeping damp, no excessive thickening, no blockage. The passages are clear, the flow is strong, there is no likelihood of imminent collapse.”

Thus, I presume, no chronic bronchitis, drowning the place in yuck. No tuberculosis to curtail the vital flow. No dyspnoea to cause a painful, gasping for air. No chronic emphysema to choke me with infinite patience to death. Have I given up smoking just in time?

Going with the regular ebb and flow, riding the rhythmic turbulence, we move unsteadily on the spongy membrane, to touch, to feel and to inspect. Sometimes the wind is light, coming and going and turning round so fast that it never reaches the outlying parts. At other times it comes in strong and steady blasts, penetrating deep to scour clean the whole enterprise. In and out. In and out. In and out, we feel the waving breeze. In and out, we hear the whooshing air. In and out, we see the moving walls yawn open and come close again. Weak or strong, fast or slow, there is a rhythm, a reassuring flow.

All at once the movement stops. The wind is captured and held in. There is no sound, no flicker of life. The walls are stretched and being kept like that. All is still. Time is in suspense.

We wait. We wait for something. Anything. We wait for the waiting to end. For a release. For a release of air. For the wind to blow, for the flow to return, for a sign that there is still life somewhere out there.

When, at long last, a whisper announces that the breeze is back, a much relieved specialist states the obvious facts: “A few precious minutes, all it takes. No breathing, no oxygen in the blood, the brain is starved, ceases to function, there is no control, the heart stops and it is all over then.”

Windpipe squeezed. Face smothered. Mouth gagged, nose blocked. Suffocated. Strangled. Hanged. Purple face, bulging eyes, limbs convulsing. The vision of a man killed at the hands of other men.

Why then do I stop breathing forced by no one but myself. Why do I arrest the natural flow and invoke voluntarily a glimpse of a sudden and dreadful end?

“Anything unexpected of course, any surprise or shock would make you catch your breath. Just waiting for something decisive to happen is quite sufficient.” I know, I know, I don’t need a specialist to tell me that.

But what if there is no sudden apparition to take the breath away, no forthcoming event out in the world about to resolve my fate, and still I wait with bated breath, and still I arrest the flow? When nothing strikes the eye, when no guillotine is about to fall, when I am not expected to perform in public, why then is the rhythm broken? And for no reason, life brought to a chilling suspense? What premonition out of nowhere fills my lungs with such panic that I dare not breathe lest the world moves one step nearer to an imminent collapse?

“The answer to certain questions are not be found here. Precisely why, at a given moment, the rhythm changes, breathing stops and returns with a sigh of relief, why it is shallow, why reassuringly deep and slow, is a matter for authorities much higher on. Messengers come to deliver orders, messengers go back to report, they run up and down informing without knowing, or themselves being the cause.”

Despite my urge to pursue the messengers to their primary source, the specialist insists we take another course. Filtering through the porous wall, we embark on a bloody voyage to the heart.

The world is red, the passage is stiflingly close, movement is laborious, progress exceedingly slow. We are somewhere in the fine mesh of the capillaries where the red cells adhere to each other and to the narrow vessel walls. The fluid, rich in proteins and plasma, is dense and viscous. Odd bits of soft, furry protrusions bar our way and constrict the flow. Resistance everywhere. Clogged, we struggle on. Stranded, we ride the next passing wave.

From somewhere far beyond, the insistent beat of a single drum casts a faint echo on our disjointed moves.

Murmurs of approval from a companion who seems to know his way around helps to lift the pall of oppression that hangs heavy over the terrain. They mean to signify that the impediments to our advance are normal, that nothing is wrong. Indeed, after a while, the passage widens a little, there is some daylight, some ease of movement, a sense of relief. I am told we are now in the venules and the venules afford a more comfortable ride. We try to keep to the middle of the stream where the current is faster and the flow almost smooth. But when we take a sharp turn or pass over a rough surface, there is turbulence in the blood, we are caught in whorls, trapped in eddies, adrift in lazy, marshy pools of the liquid stuff.

And so, travelling in dribs and drabs we come to the small veins, where we glide along seamless channels curving gently towards the single drum whose insistent beat is now no longer muffled.

The pace picks up, the passage widens, the throbbing, measured, signal is loud, continuous and clear. Between polished walls set generously apart we are moving serenely through the superior pulmonary vein to the first chamber of the heart.

There are no gates. The passage simply opens out and we find ourselves in a vast, cavernous hall of cardiac muscle. A latticework of finely striated sinew, rising high in serrated columns and linked arches, forms a secure, intricate vault. It serves to receive and hold safe the incoming flow of enriched, bright red liquid. In the questionable light of an unlit cathedral we perceive in the distance walls of live tissue advance and retreat. Moving in measured waves of unending labour, they shepherd the blood and guide its onward journey.

The drum is drowned in a welter of other sounds. There is not enough silence to accommodate each succeeding beat. Instead we are battered into a throbbing sea. A sea in pulsating turmoil, just outside the confines of the sombre vault.

"I don't expect trouble in the Atrium. After all, it's just a reception hall, a mere primer to the pump. Not a great deal of pressure here. It is something else again in the ventricle, on the other side of the mitral valve. We might as well take a leisurely look at the works before crossing over. It will be a damn sight harder afterwards."

Following these words we float with caution towards the mighty gates at the nether end as they swing sweetly open and draw softly close. They repeat each second the same rhythmic movement with monotonous, and perilously deceptive, ease. When the gates are open there is a fulsome, healthy flow. When closed, not a drop of blood seeps through. And yet we loiter here, and yet my specialist friend keeps on looking and listening, and yet he wears a furrowed brow.

"It's all in order. There is an ample supply and no trace of leakage, no backflow. Some scar tissue. It's quite old, it's stable, it does no harm, it does not matter. The left-over of a lesion, a wound inflicted a long, long time ago. Rheumatic fever most likely, caused by a simple infection of some sort. The antibodies in the blood must have reacted with a virulence that inflamed the very fabric of the heart and damaged its most delicate, vulnerable link."

You are right, you are so right, my specialist friend, my travelling companion. On the shores of the Black Sea, at the commencement of what was intended to be a summer vacation. With brother, mother and maid, when I couldn't yet tie the laces on my shoes but was already able to divine the meaning of words for strictly adult use. There was an infection, there was a rise in temperature, a wrong diagnosis, injections of a serum badly outdated. A dangerous, rheumatic fever. My brother, still a toddler, died there and then. I survived. But my life hung, for a critical period of time, in the balance.

"I have seen enough. Let's move on. Into the ventricle, for some real action. Keep close, it gets pretty rough in there, I don't want to lose you."

Thus forewarned and so advised, I cling, as best I can, to my learned companion, as we allow ourselves to be carried on the flood, past the yawning gates before they,

once more, are tight shut. Pulled along an accelerating current we are swept through a massive tube of ringed, reinforced tissue, and emerge in a maelstrom of seething blood amidst giant trunks of tendons, heaving in labour as they bind the papillary muscles to the cusp of the mitral valve.

Around us, all is sound and fury. The ridged, bridged, pockmarked walls shudder and tremble as the whole vast conical edifice contracts and expands, admitting and ejecting, each living second, an ocean of blood. Under intense pressure, we are carried on a swirling, dancing, boiling, current of red.

The noise is deafening yet we are supposed to differentiate each sound that really matters. For there are murmurs of all kinds. Ominous, dubious and benign. They all mean something and may indicate trouble somewhere in the heart. Through a confusing sonic barrier I have to listen to lectures that inform but do not satisfy.

“Given the workload and sixty odd years the cardiac muscle is in not too bad a shape. You realise, of course, that the exertions of these walls alone drives the blood round your body, from the folds of the brain to the fingertips. Seventy times a minute, twenty four hours a day, these muscles move back and forth to maintain the pressure and force the blood to flow. The current is even and the pressure is good and the chamber itself is not enlarged, so far as I can see.

But you can't tell much when the body is at rest. We'll have to exert her, put her under strain, increase the oxygen demand, raise the throughput to three, four, five times the going rate. It is only then the weak links will show up. Maybe leaks, or blockages, irregularities in rhythm or beat, which heighten the tension and diminish the flow. At your age, for example, depending on your father or the amount of bacon you have consumed, nasty little plaques may already have built serious obstacles to the coronary supply. I don't have to tell you what this would mean. One fine day, without any warning, a local blood clot, formed at the obstacle, blocks the passage, and you end up with a heart attack.”

We have an uncomfortable wait while my body, in some surgery outside, is placed on a bicycle. Which is ironic since it was my heart that deprived me, in my childhood, of owning one. Or, at least, it was a doctor's diagnosis and his edict that forbade me the two wheeled chariot every boy, in those far off days, considered his natural entitlement. I still rode, defying the edict, with speed and skill and controlled abandon, I still rode, rearing and jumping and no hands holding, I still rode to freedom, but always on a borrowed bike.

The rhythm hastens. The pressure builds. The pace accelerates. The gates are now shuddering, forced to close and open by a torrent that hardly has time to compose itself into the waves of a regular cycle. With immense energy the palpitating muscle walls compress to expel the crimson sea in frantic spurts through the mighty portal

of the aorta. Eardrums near bursting, we surge through the momentary opening and turn sharply right into the coronary artery which feeds the right side of the heart. We navigate marginal branches and diminishing channels trying to keep to the surface as we move towards the specific destination my guide has in mind.

“Good man. Even under duress everything seems in excellent working order. The old pump copes well with high demand and recovers surprisingly fast after strenuous exercise. It is most unlikely you will die as a result of a failing heart. Still, since we are here we might as well take a shortcut to the sino-atrial node and have a look at the electrics which, after all, control the whole show.”

Leaving behind the obscure pathways of a more restful heart we find ourselves, yet again, in a magnificent reception hall. It is here, in the right Atrium, that the returning blood, tired from its journey to outlying parts, gathers on its way to the lungs, to be refreshed. Immediately beneath the entrance, etched into the polished posterior wall, our eyes are attracted to a single crescent shaped muscle, finely sculpted in fibres more delicate than those actually doing the work. My specialist friend is now in full flow.

“You are looking at the pacemaker. It decides just exactly how fast your heart should beat. Unlike any other part of the anatomy, the heart is made of a material that, amazingly enough, can excite itself. Without any prompting, a single fibre, almost anywhere, may spring into action with complete spontaneity, sparking on its own. And because the heart always acts as one, on the all-or-nothing principle, the whole edifice will move into rhythmic contraction as a result. So the excitement of even the most humble particle would suffice to alter the going rate. Now, you can't have the heart jump all over the place, responding to every trivial, whimsical little flutter at any odd time, night and day. Therefore the pacemaker. If the other bundles of fibre can excite themselves, then this minor miracle of a creation, here in front of you, can do so better, faster and with infinitely greater ease. Before any of them has had a chance to think of a move, the pacemaker muscle will have imposed its own rhythmic beat on the heart, some seventy times every single minute. It may be less, it may be more, significantly more, but the pace, the pulse, the beat is always decided here.”

It is so, it is so, yet it cannot be. Perhaps, when I was still chasing the round ball, in short bursts of fiendish speed, all the unpermitted hours of the day. Perhaps, when I was still able to accelerate past a careworn adult watch with the pace of a lightning child. Perhaps, even now when the warning signs of degenerating age force upon me dull, disciplined exercise. Maybe then and now, and in suchlike events, this fine instrument of excitement is the one who decides.

But when my heart hammers away in ferocious blows against my chest in terror or sheer love, this crescent of refined muscle is not the final arbiter. It cannot be the culpable instigator of all fear.

Methinks, we must go somewhere else to trace what had happened to my heart when I first beheld a mother frightened by a ghost. When I met an archetypal monster crawling under my own cot. When the wings of the black bird eclipsed the light and brought the original darkness into my sunny world.

We should account elsewhere for the galloping heart that never dared approach the one and only girl ever framed, untouched, in the sparse history of my platonic loves.

For this is not the source of the sudden change of pitch and beat that mysteriously assail my heart with present woes and announce untitled ills, guests uninvited, still to come.

On cue, as a rejoinder to my thoughts, the specialist adds a few more words: "Of course its not quite as simple as that. Widespread areas of the brain can also have a say. The sympathetic nervous system is brought into play. Hormonal substances released into blood vessels constrict the circulation. The heart is then called upon to perform work at a higher rate.

The hypothalamus, you must watch the hypothalamus, my friend. In the lower brain, you know, where instinct rules and sees to things that require no thought. Like sleep and sex, digesting food, breathing in and out and other such mundane activities. When strongly stimulated, this centre of primitive life, can activate at once the systems needed to treble the flow of blood and galvanise the heart. The arterial pressure rises, blood is pumped furiously fast, the nervous system itself is at fever pitch and before you know it, you are in a state of alarm."

Yes, I am in a state of alarm. Undeniably. And often. Never knowing why. We must to the hypothalamus. Who knows, we may find the source of all my troubles, lurking nonchalantly there.

But my guide is of another mind. As it is not too far, he recommends a tour of the stomach. An unappetising prospect, but being yet another seat trouble, it should be seen.

Going with the regular flow, circulating with the blood, visiting once more the lungs and the three other chambers of the heart, propelled through the aorta, we navigate with circumspection the visceral riches that lie in the cavity of the abdominal wall.

To outsiders the stomach is virtually closed. The muscles of its outer layer stretch to make the greater curvature greater still, but they allow little of any solid substance to get through. There is virtually no absorption. From where we are the only way in is through the glands.

Once more we have to wade through a stifling network of slothful capillaries in order to infiltrate the stomach lining. Sunk deep into a mucous substance we bide our time in the privacy of a tubular cell for some food to be served. On its arrival we

are secreted on a flow of gastric juices into the workings of the stomach, not a place for cultivated folk.

The corpus is in revolution, and everything within it, is revolting. All that once contrived to entice the eye, titillate the nose, make the mouth water, is now a mess of repugnant proportion.

A three course meal composed of slices of fois gras in the palest of chamois browns, succulent duck dressed in its own crispy skin with a fragrant orange sauce, and chestnut puree on a bed of freshly whipped cream (each course washed down by an appropriate wine and a witty flow of erudite conversation) lies here, unrecognisable, churned over and over, destined to turn into an amorphous decaying paste of murky chyme. A substance which will wend its sad, diminishing way on a prolonged journey through labyrinthine bowels to emerge finally into the light of day as plain shit.

We are in a monstrous, misshapen processing plant whose very fabric is alive and constantly moving. The curved walls heave themselves, shifting the incoming food in slimy waves from one end to the other. The convoluted floor, snaking itself along, is awash with streams of hydrochloric acid, pepsins, enzymes, vicious liquids of all sorts, all eager to attack the tasty morsels, corrode their body, destroy their structure. Oppressive gases circulate in the air, the ground is covered in thick, viscid mucus.

As we slide and slither on the shifting terrain, inspecting the fundus, corpus, antrum, and everything else on the way, my expert conductor keeps a self satisfied smile on his smug face.

“It’s so very clever, you know, so very clever. Even as you smell something cooking, even as you start salivating, the stomach is already prepared for action. Messages are passed down from appetite centres, the intrinsic nerve plexus is informed, the glands are all set and ready to go. When the food arrives the juices are flowing, and the flow is strictly determined by what you see, smell and taste.

The exact amount of enzymes, of acid and alkaline, is proportional to the meat and potatoes and cream you polish off your plate. All is measured, analysed and supplied with what is required for it to be thoroughly mixed, smoothly carried about, finally passed on. With but a little exchange of information with the brain, the stomach knows enough to do all the rest, on its own.

But what is most remarkable my friend, is the balance of power between acid and alkaline, the two arch enemies. The acid breaks down the food, the alkaline mucus provides its smooth passage. Too little acid or too much mucous secretion and there is no digestion. Too much acid or too little mucus and the acid destroys the lining. Its all down to the fine balance. Tilting it either way, you are in trouble.”

In trouble. Yes, I am in trouble. In big trouble. The question is what kind of trouble. Where is its source. Why is it there. And what chance I have to emerge alive, sane and tolerably well.

We have to wait for the stomach to empty itself. No particle of food, in whatever shape or size, must be allowed to obstruct our view of the true state of affairs. So the expert says and, here at least, we must follow his advice.

It takes time for the place to empty and for the emptiness to reveal any signs of disease. Even so, my guide follows the process with cheerful interest and seems altogether satisfied. The revolting mixture, the offensive sounds, the appalling sights, are all greeted with approving nods and knowing murmurs of assent.

“Whilst not an absolute guarantee, a good digestion is a prerequisite to health, vitality and strength. You have it, no question, you have it. It all goes down smoothly, without a hitch, nothing is left behind to lie heavy and disturb the peace.”

Nevertheless we wander about, still looking for ulcers around the pylorus, cardia and other such likely sites. Fortunately there are none to be found. And yet his expert eye lingers on, and yet he is reluctant to depart.

“No peptic ulcers. No ulcers as such. But there is history. We’ve had some trouble here before, haven’t we.”

As a matter of fact, no, I never had trouble assimilating anything. I have always enjoyed coarse pork sausages soaked in sizzling fat on frozen winter mornings. It was my mother who had the delicate stomach. It was she who was reduced to rusk and black tea every other morning. It was she who resorted to a clear soup and plain, mashed potatoes, whilst feeding the rest of us calves liver fried with onions in a piquant sauce of her own fancy concoction. It was she, not I, who picked her nervous way through every blessed dish, always afraid of what could follow.

Replying to my thoughts, the expert carries on digressing. “It is not just the digestion. Ulcers have more to do with the stomach when its empty than when it is full. If there is no food to attack the acid will destroy the lining of the stomach. It will simply eat through the mucous protection, irritate the surface and lacerate the muscle wall. And once an ulcer is well and truly established, you might have to remove most of the stomach to get rid of it.”

On cue, as we two meander, vaguely measuring the cavernous emptiness in my midriff, disquiet materialises from nowhere. Ominous sensations drift in, failing to find a firm location. A trickle of acid, for no apparent reason, is making its irritating way past the cardia. The flutter-valve, usually so reliable, fails to block the creeping finger of liquid from escaping. A whiff of burning flesh. The shadow of a pain. Perhaps an early warning of some human sacrifice. Who is to be the victim? On what altar? To appease which god?

Slowly but noticeably the atmosphere inside my stomach is changing. Chunks of air are sucked in, the walls stretch, pressure is mounting. Under increasing tension the oblique fibres along the surfaces are contorted into unnatural lines around the cardiac notch. Straining beyond their customary reach, the innermost muscles squirm and twist and knot themselves into zones of acute discomfort.

Devoid of substance, with nothing useful to accomplish, the whole living edifice is caught in a vicious cycle of convulsions. It is as if, in revenge for being deprived of proper nourishment, the stomach has resolved to try to devour its own anatomy.

We are tossed about on the heaving waves of an invisible terror, a terror no one else but I can actually feel. With no footholds and lost bearings, with floors, walls and ceiling in violent motion, constantly interchanging, my travelling companion is all shaken. The expert is a little less sure of his expertise.

“Odd, very odd. There seems to be no pathology here that would justify this kind of upheaval. Of course there could be excessive stimulation of parts of the vagus by impulses originating in the cerebrum. Reflexes do pass all the way to the brain stem and come back here again.

And then, as always, there are bits of the hypothalamus and other limbic areas of the lower brain that can create havoc all over the body. They simply send out rogue messages through the autonomic nervous network. Nothing really wrong. No cause to worry unduly. Not much we can do about them here. This kind of thing, these strange disturbances may have more to do with the cerebral cortex. I can’t say I understand them, I certainly don’t like them, but there they are and we just have to put up with them.”

I had to put up with it all my life. Before the gong went, before the seconds left the ring, all throughout the preparations, from the time the fight was first ever contemplated, it sat enthroned in the pit of my stomach spreading its tyranny over my whole being, my time, my shameful inaction. Any confrontation to come would leave my midriff with a yawning weakness, anxious to absolve the demands of honour, to still the voice of self respect, to obliterate pride.

Paralysed, feeble, it was always my stomach that counselled caution and nagged at me to abandon the fight.

But at least in the past, the gnawing pain, the knotted braids of distress in my belly were wrought by evils outside. Evils I could see, identify, anticipate. Evils that once came to pass, no matter how bad, would lose some of their potency. Whereas now, the pain, turmoil, the distress is not imported from without. It is not a translated text from a common script shared by all humanity. It has no objective reference. It is not even available to my own other senses. I can’t see the enemy, I hear no news of his coming, I don’t smell his presence.

The attack materialises from nowhere. It is launched without warning. From a light disturbance it builds quickly into a crisis. It transforms a calm, harmless stomach into a gym of tortured contortions. And, worst of all, when it leaves, there are no clues, no explanations.

As conditions ease and life in my innards returns to its ruminant norm, it is time to leave the stomach in search of the ultimate cause. More than ever I am inclined to turn upwards and visit the brain. But my guide, the expert in the field, reminds me of the bladder. A place of interest, he claims, on no account to be missed.

Although the bladder is not far from where we are, our route there is not straightforward. Nor is it convenient. At the outset we linger for meaningless hours, just waiting to be released. Eventually, as a minuscule particle of an amorphous soft mass, we are pressed through pylorus and enter, ingloriously, the small intestine.

We travel on the inside of a giant tubular structure. The casing is soft, elasticised, opaque. Our travel is tedious and episodic. A stuttering production line in slow motion, we are shunted in moves that are short, spaced far apart and unpredictable. In the long stationary intervals, under the monotonous light of a forsaken industrial gloom, my guide provides a steady stream of educated commentary on what's going on.

My attention is drawn to the differing complexion of our travelling companions, the various proteins, starches and fats of all sorts. I am forced to listen to the detail of their imminent fate. There is much talk and evidence of pancreatic juices, of maltose, isomaltose, fructose and glucose, of rivers of bile straight from the liver, of breaking up fat globules, of free fatty acids ferried here, there and everywhere, of a myriad of invading enzymes, each pedantically equipped with a destructive little speciality of its own.

But the whole of this dreary process and all the accompanying, well informed jargon, leaves me cold. It does not trouble me. It does not seem relevant. It is academic. It is a bore.

After an age of dismal progress, somewhere past the duodenum, in the deep recesses of the middle bowel, with our fellow travellers fragmented, dissolved, much diminished, we reach a piece of gut which, according to my voluble guide, provides the way out.

Forests of colossal vegetation protrude from the opaque tubular walls, interfere with the smooth passage and insist on taking a substantial toll. Some movement is arrested, individuals are detached from the transport, caught in the dense branches, destined to be absorbed.

We are in the land of the Villi, the expert points out, the convoluted design of which extends the surface area of the gut by a factor of twenty seven. This makes it vital

to the whole digestive process, which is great, but more to the point, it outlines the viaduct of our retreat.

Waterborne to the inner fold of a giant leaf, by the magic of osmosis, we filtrate ourselves through the intestinal wall. We seep through a maze of capillaries, venules and lesser veins, to the mainstream of portal blood which carries in its stately flow, straight to the liver.

Blood and blood and blood everywhere. An interminable purifying plant of vast, interconnected storage dams and their attendant canals of gently moving, rich plasma.

My companion would like to stay around and survey the scene for a while but I have no more patience for guided tours and so we traverse at once the central vein and the inferior vena cava. From there an already familiar route takes us to the right side of the heart, then to the lungs, the left atrium, left ventricle and back again, once more into the aorta.

We are on our way at last, rushing and being rushed in the fast flowing current, towards my body's last and foremost extremity. There is a slight hesitation at the juncture of the renal arteries. According to expert opinion there is no difference whether we go left or right, both kidneys are much the same. For myself, I am not convinced. Superstition holds that left and right can never be the same, and I am highly superstitious.

Out of the sweeping torrent, flowing left into an arterial tree of splitting and narrowing branches, we lose momentum and drift turgidly around the cortex of the kidney. Having chosen, arbitrarily, one of the two million available nephrons, we leak with microscopic slowness through a convoluted world of minuscule loops, ducts and channels, noting nothing of any interest.

Sealed tight in airless avenues of indolence, we hardly realise that, somewhere along the line, the character of our effluent has changed. It's not blood plasma any more, it is a pale, watery fluid without distinction, without character.

Throughout our sluggish progress in these obscure byways that seem to lead nowhere, we regularly lose a great many of those travelling with us. One by one, they simply vanish through the interminable, porous walls, leaving behind only the riff-raff, the useless, the unwanted. At least this is what I gather from my ever present guide. It is his belief that only by keeping such low company can we reach our final objective and complete the tour of inspection.

And so it is. In the midst of various excesses, foul smelling urea and other ill assorted by-products of the dreary process of keeping alive, we are distilled into a quiescent pond of hopes abandoned. Floating in water contaminated by everything that is old, decayed, beyond further use, we are eventually drained down a succession of such and other dismal pools into a giant lake of slowly fomenting piss. Which, I am informed, is called the pelvis. The kidney's pelvis, not my own.

The waters of the lake are a transparent golden yellow. They hardly move. Skirting submerged wrecks of organic and mineral substance, we swim hard against no current. The smell is acrid. An air of desolation sits heavy on the surface. No semblance of life, no sign of renewal.

I find the place hard to take, am desperate to leave. My companion does not seem to mind, he is in no hurry. His expert eye tends to light on drifting objects of some clinical interest and anyway, he tells me, he is well used to the smell of decay, death and other things unpleasant.

Still, the lake comes to a sort of an end. There is some movement, a flow, and we are carried quite quickly on a gold river, through a voluminous, smooth-lined slippery canal, to a new landscape. A landscape filled with ancient fears and fresh sources of current apprehension.

The impression I have is of being under the canvas cover of a gigantic marquee, whose loose, flapping, segments reach into the far distance. The ground itself, where visible, is hazy, cloudy, fluffy soft, so that on each step we sink in it to our knees. But most of it is flooded in shallow seas of the same yellow liquid, increasingly foul, foetid, repugnant.

Unlike myself, the expert is calm, even cheerful. But then we are not clambering all over his bladder. "Its neither full, nor quite empty. First of all we'll fill her right to the brim. We shall then see what she's really made of."

So my body, sitting in the surgery, is made to imbibe gallons of tepid tap water. We sit about, watching the tide of urine idly rise and claim the outstanding landmarks. The urge to let go invades me in waves of growing urgency but I have to hold it all in as the man of science marks the exact waterline and takes elaborate measurements. On his order, and under his watchful eye, the floodgates open, the waters burst. Again, the watermark is recorded, the duration and the intensity of the act, strictly logged.

Standing in line, we, boys of the same tribal allegiance over half a century ago, in the spirit of not so friendly rivalry, did compare performance, on roughly similar terms. It was important then, it is even more important now.

"Not very satisfactory, is it? As you, yourself can see, there isn't any power there and much of the stuff is left behind, the bladder does not empty." Awkward and intimate questions are set, as to when, and how often, in the course of the day and in the middle of the night, and in exactly what manner it all comes, or doesn't come to pass. And answers there are none, at least not ones to lend comfort.

"At your age, of course, you are entitled to expect some muscle fatigue, some loss of resilience, generally a little less control over various functions of the body. But I think something isn't right. We'll take a good look, shall we?"

In my position, being already on the spot, this is a rhetoric question. I am therefore condemned to a rigorous examination, a meticulous survey of the urinary world and all its accessories.

Although way off and difficult to access, we are heading straight towards the prostate, in such cases, apparently always the prime suspect. We wade interminably through a terrain more suited to amphibian life, descending lower and lower. We crawl between serrated layers of interwoven muscle, slide and slither along avenues of fatty tissue, cross rivers of blood, and find ourselves, on the underside of the bladder, face to face with a massive, barren mountain. Its pockmarked face, covered in craters, nodules of rock, the lack of vegetation, would suggest that as far as mountains go, this is a late geological formation.

Climbing steadily, taking further measurements and testing at regular intervals the substance of our path, my guide still finds time to make observations, more for his benefit than my own.

“We know precious little about the prostate. Quite frankly, we aren’t sure why its there. It doesn’t, of course, produce any semen, or the rich, nourishing stream to carry the sperms along. Maybe, just maybe, it secretes some alkaline to neutralise the acid and so help to fertilise the egg. But, at your stage of life, I assume this is of little interest. What is a fact is that it starts off relatively humble, in a modest size. But just when it starts losing any usefulness it may have had, at the age of forty or fifty, it begins to grow and keeps on growing, as you see, to an appreciable size. Nobody can stop it and nobody knows why.”

The man is quite happy with this state of ignorance. He keeps on climbing, keeps on measuring and whistles to himself. “What matters ultimately is not its size but whether it interferes with the flow. You see, there is not much space here for unscheduled development. So the prostate spreads around, encroaching on neighbouring terrain. Trouble is, sometimes the bladder neck is squeezed just at the wrong place, and sometimes its whole outlet is choked off by the mountainous lobes. But I wouldn’t worry, in such a case we would simply excavate the lot.”

Smell of ether, pad over the nose. Theatre of operations. Powerful floodlights, masked actors in white. Inert man, naked on table, at the mercy of acquired skills and manufactured goods. Swabs, clamps, pincers and a number of ill defined instruments of incision.

“Its nowadays quite a simple procedure. We wouldn’t cut you open, we’d just go through the penis and follow nicely the bed of the lower urinary tract. It shouldn’t affect performance, at least as far as erection is concerned. If some men have a problem, its more in their mind. Or maybe because, sometime, after surgery, at ejaculation, the semen does not come spurting forth.”

Ah, erection, there's the rub. It seems to have a mind of its own. Who knows for sure what library of laws governs the rise, the sustenance, its sudden demise.

"No need to bother with a condom, yes?" An attempt to cheer me up and hide his slight embarrassment.

At any rate we have circumscribed the mountain, gauged the distance, located the border, sifted the material of its paths. In the valley, standing face to face, I hear the expert's advice: "Although there are some minor signs of enlargement, for the time being, the prostate is fine."

By inference, trespassing a wall of blood, muscle and fat, we locate ourselves once more inside the bladder. We trudge across acres of amphibian country, searching for signs of that which we do not like to name, evidence of that we all dread.

By way of being helpful, my clinical guide describes the pretty pink cabbages growing in profusion we are seeking not to find. In conversational tones he casually inquiries whether I have done a lot of dyeing, or moulding rubber, or covering cables, whether I have spent much time in Africa, the land of flukes that dwell happily in human veins and to bilharzia.

"As with all cancer, it is critical to detect it early on. Leaving it alone, to grow unhindered, you may end up racked with pain, passing bloody urine with extreme difficulty every few minutes, night and day. Inoperable. Beyond remedy, beyond hope."

We have criss-crossed the bladder, we've covered every inch of the ground. We discovered no cabbages, saw no exotic plants, stumbled on no unsuspected stones.

But the man of science, although returning empty handed, is uncommonly pleased. He is all smiles, as befits a man who has just acquired an abundance of answers to the one question which had him long perplexed. Sitting at the very neck of the bladder, my loyal guide takes me into his confidence.

"It is quite normal for the walls to thicken with age and generally this is of no great consequence. Unfortunately, when it happens just about here, at the narrowest passage, it tends to constrict the flow. It is nothing drastic, there is no emergency. You can let it be for a while, treat it as one of the minor inconveniences of life, but in the long term, its bound to get worse.

Actually, let me describe, in simplified terms, for your benefit, how it all works. When the bladder fills, the walls stretch and send a signal to bring into play the relevant muscles. The detrusor contracts, shrinking the bladder, the internal sphincter relaxes, and, unless you decide otherwise, the urine flows. This is what happens when everything is as should be. If there is an obstruction, if the gap here is stinted, the contracting muscles are strained to push through the current. They have to work harder and harder against increasing resistance. As a result these muscles will enlarge

and, like those of an athlete, become jumpy. You will have the urge to do it more often but the bladder won't ever really empty. In the end, the muscle gives up the unequal struggle, the bladder becomes just a floppy sack, without any power.

Sunk in a lake of piss, drowned in polluted waters of my own making. How long will it take? How unbearable the process?

"Well, such...such an outcome would be way down the road... in any case, it needn't come to that. I suggest we make a nice little incision, resculpt a bit of wall, make some room, open up the flow and you'll find life a lot easier... now, as I said, there is no hurry, no deadline, but waiting doesn't do the bladder any good. The longer you leave it, for complete success, the worse the odds."

What is proposed is a routine operation, a surgical intervention of a minor sort. Put so amiably, in the reassuring tones of sweet reason, with no real alternative, it is very tempting to accept. Why panic, then?

There is the anaesthetic, a faithful impersonation of death. There is the cutting of flesh, sinew and nerve, a violent invasion of a miraculously precise living entity, generally known as me. There is the hospital of regimented beds, a host of half ignorant carers in various degrees of authority, an all pervasive smell of lives preserved artificially. And then, there is just the sense of uncertainty, of things not going to plan, of a knife slipping, a cut in the wrong place and... incontinence.

"I knew you'd ask me about that. People always do. Its quite understandable. No chance of it, put your mind at rest. It's yet one more reason you are fortunate to have been born a man. You see, we men have two sets of muscles to contain the flow, women have only one."

The other plusses being, presumably, a prick, a soul and not having to give birth.

"The inner set relax more or less automatically as soon as the detrusor contracts, the external sphincter is controlled by you consciously. You decide, at your convenience, the proper time to let go."

A decision that is of no significance except at the very beginning of life and near the end. A decision children find so hard to understand, a decision, men of my age, find increasingly constrained to make.

Except, of course, that it's not as simple as that. There is a world of difference between a closed circuit of a reflex arc in the lower regions of the spine, and the fully conscious volition of an adult mind. Between wetting nappies at random and a scheduled performance, planned and publicised ahead of time.

We are all acquainted with the sudden, unexplained surges before any examination, as we impatiently stand in a line, well or ill prepared to testify and remit into the scales of an uncertain justice our work, learning, and our luck.

We have all experienced the compulsive effect of cold shivers, the freezing, naked air, the sight and sound of running waters, and the contagious urge of communal acts.

“Remember, remember to empty your bladder before you propose, or expose, or engage in the matter” goes the saying, a saying that hits the nail on the head.

And then there are the nights. The nights when the higher authorities are supposed to slumber, when daytime prohibitions turn into nocturnal inhibitions, inhibitions which have the power to persist over a whole lifetime.

The dream. Impelled, with ever increasing urgency, to seek a place I do not yet know, a place I cannot find, as I move my ill equipped and partially clothed body over improbable obstacles on a half familiar map, to accomplish a task that has never been defined. Waking in the nick of time to direct the burning stream into a designated receptacle, so specifically and functionally designed. The dream that saved embarrassment and haunted the rest of my life.

And the dream before that dream. In the open sunlight of a forest clearing, under a warm shower of rain, I soak up with immense pleasure the golden flow, to wake up in the pitch dark on sodden sheets of shame, reeking of stale pee.

And before that dream, no dream at all. Just the yellow stains staring blind into disappointed, forbearing, adult eyes.

No, it's not as simple as that. It's not a straightforward equation between the quantity of urine and the measure of self-control. There is an entire nervous system, informed by fear, a fear that comes in many shapes and sizes, imperious in the day and ingenious at night, a fear that invokes dreams, dreams that safeguard or abridge sleep, a sleep that permits or forbids the disgorging of a pent-up dam.

Is this intricate play of two forces to be subject to an abrupt knife, to a clinical cut? Can this fine balance of instinct and culture, acquired with so much sacrifice and pain, end in total loss of control? With a comfortless tube and a plastic bag shamefully hidden from view?

“There isn't very much more we can do in here... you know the score pretty well... shall we go?”

By all means. Let us. Let us leave behind this morbid scene of perishing reality. Lets get out of this amazing world of organic substance where everything is precariously poised, a hairbreadth away from unsurmised calamity. I am so tired of seeing, smelling, touching living matter to discover an untold variety of ways it can all go so dreadfully wrong.

The two of us, my faithful guide and I, take a last look at the undulating plains of the trigone and pass through the narrow confines of the internal urethral orifice. We trudge along a dry river bed, in a desert landscape criss-crossed by wadis liable to

torrential inundation without the least warning sign. As is his wont, the consultant feels it his mission to highlight, with erudite comment, the principal features of our route.

“These caves over the high-water mark, they are the openings of the prostatic gland, of no great import... the sharply rising mount beyond you see, is a little more significant. It has the shape of an extinct volcano, with a crater at the peak. It is the *utriculus masculinus*, a vestige of the womb. A womb, we, men, have sadly lost. The two huge dark cavities you observe on either side, are the ejaculatory ducts which, when called upon, pump semen into this tract, just about where we are now. The mount is called *verumontanum*. I have no idea why.”

Oh, my expert friend, my tutor in anatomy, the prince of understatements, what have we stumbled on here?! This place is not a little more significant, this is the mountain of truth. The mountain which marks the four way boundary. Between male and female. Between desire and fear.

This is the parting of ways, the separation of the waiting womb from the travelling sperm. Here is the source of the fatal rift that denies us self-regeneration. The rift that makes us dependent, that compels us return, and keep returning, to whence we originated. This is the place of the original sin that makes us, humans, so unbearably, so unforgettably, mortal.

Given such peculiar juxtaposition, it's no wonder a weak bladder can dampen desire, or that an erection should block the passage of fear. That an urge emanating from this region should produce wasted waters and, just as readily, the seeds of life itself.

Given this delicate proximity, its no wonder I acquired in early youth the skill to massage the impulse to pee into magnificent erotic fantasies. Nor should it come as a surprise that many a promising performance in my lady's chamber is curtailed by a sudden, embarrassing, retreat to relieve an even more pressing need.

All our life we struggle to establish a clear distinction, to reinforce a fragile boundary, to maintain a precarious balance between what is irreconcilable, whilst the males of other, inferior species, have quietly perfected an alchemy of fragrant substance, at once to attract all females and strictly delimit their exclusive territory.

Stranded in the silence between us two, divided by idle reflections, we are brought back to the instant here and now by a dramatic change in scenery.

Tremors. Distant at first, but fast approaching. Tremors at diminishing intervals. Tremors of increasing intensity. The whole river bed quakes, then deepens, widens, appears to split up. The terrain under our feet lifts, the horizon alters. A rising roar. Irruption of pearl coloured lava. Our bodies carried on the crest of an irresistible spasm along the elongated, stiff, flooded riverbed. Half submerged in the glutinous

substance, fighting for breath, we are spewed out, at last, of my exhausted, weary body, into the clean, refreshing air.

I am not altogether surprised to see my companion prepare to take his farewells. I have long suspected his reluctance to explore the higher centres. To climb upwards, to ascend the sophisticated network of frail, sensitive nerves, to attempt the medulla, pons, the thalamus and go beyond, to the very cortex of the brain.

Behind an authoritarian desk, from the comfort of his armchair, supported by sundry documents and notes, the expert dismisses me with the following, highly professional, words.

“On the whole, taking everything into account, I’d say the results are most satisfactory. You are obviously very fit and wearing well. There’s not much wrong with any of the major organs, no significant degeneration anywhere. Such minor faults as there are, can be rectified relatively easily, without too much fuss. I can’t honestly see any reason why you should not enjoy good health for many years to come.

Our bodies, alas, are not made to last forever. Eventually you are bound to notice some weakness here and there, some deterioration in performance, some irregularities, some loss in one faculty or another.

The great thing is not to pay it too much attention, not to worry, not to preoccupy yourself with every little discomfort, each newly acquired pain. Trying to trace suspect somatic events to their true source, to determine its precise causes, analysing benign and malignant possibilities, can so easily become an obsession. And obsessions may pose a serious threat to your health.

I know you are not completely satisfied with the answers I can provide. You seem to think that the clues are to be found in the higher centres, in the central nervous system, in one or other region of the brain.

I know you want to go up there, to see things for yourself. I am afraid I won’t be able to accompany you. Moreover, I strongly recommend you do not go.

You see, we don’t know enough about what goes on there and do not have the means to intervene effectively. There are drugs, of course, there are always drugs. But they have a general effect over a large area, changing everything around, with incalculable consequences to work, love, play and your whole attitude to life.

We’re are working on it and we are getting there. Quite remarkable results have been obtained in rats and, indeed, in vertebrates of all kind. As far as the brain is concerned, the future is really bright. Most of it, most of the benefit, will be a shade late for our generation. But then, with all the testing and the exaggerated safety margins now in force, these things take time.

No doubt, if you insist, there are any number of touts who will offer to take you into your brain, but none of them will have spent his youth in a medical school or his working life in its disciplined specialities.

Take my advice. You've laboured hard, you have done a lot, you have achieved much. Go home, relax, learn to enjoy the remaining years of your life."

I wish I could. I genuinely would like to follow his advice. I am sure it's well meant, I am sure it is wise.

But I cannot. I cannot rest in this half light. I want the bright illumination before the final darkness descends. I want to drain the well of my fear. I must have my own particular brand of comfort, my own hard earned peace of mind.

We shake hands. We part. I am alone once more, on the way to an uncertain future in the midst of an undiscovered past.

CHAPTER XIX

ASCENT

To begin with the road is almost level, well travelled and generously broad. You may stray and range and be forgiven. People abound. They all go in the same direction, although the pace varies greatly. There is much inconsequential chatter, attempts at wit and a general air of false gaiety pervades the crowd.

At first sight the crowd appears to be composed of ordinary members of the travelling public, engaged in the daily business of survival. The general impression is that of a good cross section of the populace, unbiased in terms of age, sex, education and wealth.

After a while, moving alongside many men and even more women, both ugly and fair, not paying any particular attention, it dawns on me that something is wrong. Each one of us carries a highly specific personal pain, a pain impervious to remedies currently being dispensed by the high street chemist. Each one of us is haunted, and each one, within the multitude, tends to walk alone.

From words dropped here and there, from oblique references, from certain gestures and torsion of facial musculature, I infer that nobody can adequately describe his pain. Nobody knows its source, nobody believes it can be shared. Even so, most of the pilgrims try to articulate it in some form or other, accosting strangers close by with intimate tales of their travails. But the response, although blessed with many yes's and affirmative shakes of the head, is never satisfactory. The sufferer is left with the conviction that he has not really been understood.

The road rises, the pace slows, the crowd is stretched, gaps appear and become larger. Preliminary signs of tiredness. A few shoulders sag, eyes are lowered, people loiter with no intent.

Thirst. Dry mouths. Assorted containers are opened. Water, home bottled. Wines, of multifarious vintage, chateau bottled. Nice cups of tea are offered all over the place, most of them of the herbal variety. All manner and type of liquid refreshment is available except for fresh water. There is no spring, no brook, no well in sight. So the thirst persists. It becomes part of the landscape.

The road narrows somewhat. The incline is a little steeper. There is now less latitude. Stragglers fall further behind, and there are more stragglers. Groups of weariness coalesce informally to seek outside assistance. For the first time, vendors of motley goods and services crop up by the wayside.

The feet, being in the forefront of any slog, feature high in the list of casualties. Blisters, abrasions, swellings, aches and sprains are the order of the day. But help is at hand. Seated on three-legged milking stools, nuns of the Manipulating Order of Latter-day Saints are serving with devotion those unable to walk. They stroke, they soothe, they turn and twist, they prod and press and poke, they massage toe, heel, instep, sole. In so doing, they claim to restore not just the feet, but the whole worn body and the wilting spirit too! Although I feel my feet, I decide to pass by, and, in passing, I note that none of those treated is in any hurry to rejoin the climb.

We continue to mount. On the left hand side, just off the road, from behind a colourful display of oily substance and essential scent, a bevy of high priestesses brazenly advertise their wares. Customers, having paid their dues, are laid without fuss on open air altars to have their aching bodies anointed all over by loving, practised hands. The relief, if relief there be, is brief.

Further on, we come across a pride of performing acrobats. Contorting their bodies into unlikely forms, breathing deep and letting the air long resonate their vocal cords, these circus artists of the East attract a considerable following. Pupils who practice religiously such arts are promised immunity from the stresses and strains of the journey, and beyond that, eventually, the faculty of performing spectacular feats. Although tempted, I chose to go on, and observe, from the corner of my eye, the discipline of unrelenting years etched on every muscle, each and every moving limb.

At a higher altitude, in company with fellow travellers whose number is much reduced, I meet another lot of consultants all willing to help. They have sublime stage presence and demand nothing less than the surrender of the self. In return they offer a shortcut to the summit, a passage in relative comfort and double quick time. For compulsive pilgrims, long on the road, nursing an intimate, personal pain, still thirsty, still clinging to children of disappointed hopes, the temptation to surrender is great.

I watch the weaker ones fall, one by one, under the spell of the hypnotic eye. One by one, they are transported, oblivious to the world, to I know not where. I see them disappear, one after another, and I am told they'll be back, down from the summit, all hale, hearty and utterly refreshed.

Since I am running out of time and do not have the leisure to await such a return, I am introduced to members of a previous generation who, supposedly, have already been up there. They seem less troubled, less fraught. They manage their pain better,

or else, it is, indeed, all gone. But, as for being on the summit, they remember far too much or nothing at all.

So I decline the offer and resolve to move on. The road deteriorates. Its face is partly eroded, partly lined by irregular furrows ploughed by cultured men. There are no crowds left, but a goodly number of individuals have still the stamina and strength to continue the climb.

In the distance, on a plateau set calmly between towering heights, I glimpse a field of statues. Sculpted in stone, they are of grey, sitting men. On closer inspection they turn out to be, without exception, human beings, draped in loose garments, sitting in a semi-lotus position, very nearly still. Just above, leaning on a prominent rock a sage is addressing himself to one and all and to no one in particular. Oracular words of dubious wisdom float freely from his bearded mouth.

“If you climb, you cannot rise. If you follow the mounting road you will never reach the mountain’s top. At that height the air is too rarefied. From that height the view is blinding and divine. The absence of mankind is all important and makes no difference. Whoever reaches the summit will find the burden carried throughout a lifetime, unbearable up there.

To go up, you have to stay here. To move, you have to learn to be still. To reach the heights, you are forbidden to climb. To be free of your pain, first you have to hold it dear.

To do nothing is the only thing to do. All else ends in despair. A despair beyond redemption. A despair without end.”

Categorically forewarned, along with others, I am inclined to stay. Moving closer to the human statues, we find each one, eyes closed, intent on not being disturbed. The breathing is shallow, almost inaudible. Occasionally a shoulder is drawn back slightly to perfect the posture, otherwise nothing moves. No discernible clue as to what is going on. If anything is.

A new intake is shaped into a preordained form. An old lesson is read out. We are taught to breathe again, as if we never breathed before, or breathed wrong all along. We are taught to look, as if we never looked before, or saw nothing at all. We are taught to relax, as if we never relaxed before, or knew no rest in a long lifetime of strife and war.

Aligned in serried ranks, we sit in the semi-lotus position for an impatient number of years. The position is not comfortable, it is not meant to be. Desk bound for so long there is a natural tendency to slouch, which, quite rightly, is considered here a sin. Having sat mostly in armchairs, the severely bent knees are not accustomed to supporting the weight of our bodies on the sparse, bare, stony floor. Still, in time, we acquire the pose and learn to keep it without strain, without thought.

But the main idea is not to have an idea at all. To concentrate but not to reason. To focus but have no objective. To visualise but not imagine. To see but not grasp, own, order or classify. To feel and not touch. To sense and leave all sensations behind. To rise, to soar. And, of course, to defy gravity.

Long, long before the possible fulfilment of so enchanting a promise, I desert the field and leave the grey mantled statues to contemplate in peace their uncompromising fate. I just do not have in me the patience of a patient. Even less the discipline of a disciple.

Despite dire warnings, and against the trend, I resume my climb along the mountain road, ever steeper, more and more a track. My recent school days have not been a complete waste, I take with me, perhaps, a greater ability to rest and, on momentous occasions, the sense to pause a little, and take a timely breath.

Up ahead and also below me as I turn my head, I still see a few determined men and dogged women keep to their self-set course. On catching up we exchange personal keepsakes making sure they are not of an intimate sort. We may adjust our steps for a while, just to keep company, before one draws away, leaving both of us to our own devices.

An inviting signboard announces the end of the track. It is the last outpost. The ultimate place to provide shelter and offer outside help.

The casualty department of an emergency ward. Without beds, nurses, medical equipment of any kind. Without surgeons to operate in the last resort. Just an interminable row of confessional booths, each supplied with a couch and a pair of ears listening acutely. The ears are attached to gravely nodding heads of disinterested men who, eyes averted, take nebulous notes in an illegible hand. Lying on the couches, the wounded hikers, unable to walk unassisted, parley. Parley interminably.

It is not simply a question of a stream of pent-up words pouring forth aimlessly into the well appointed chamber of a convenient silence. The words seek an audience, and in the audience a recognition, and in the recognition some kind of approval, and if an approval is not forthcoming, at least a highly personal absolution from the communal guilt.

But such recognition is not easy to obtain, approvals are rare and far between. As for absolution, it has a price, a price only desperate men are willing to pay. Thus the lopsided negotiations are prolonged over a period of frustrating and frustrated years. The wounded, couch bound, keep revealing themselves, keep asking for terms. The confessors, always ready to listen, mean with words, protected by the authority of the silent, yield hardly any ground in response.

The revelations accumulate, their convoluted threads reach further and further back into an obscure history. Tears of anger, pain, shame, are encouraged to flow

backwards and purify their own polluted source. The tacit consensus, emerging laboriously between two such unequal partners, can never aspire to embody the truth. It is, even so, a healing compromise which enables long suffering cases to get off the couch and stand, more or less, on their own two feet.

I see them wandering off, without any discernible sign of pain, down the mountain, having lost any desire to scale the highest peak. It is as if, for them, there is nothing more at stake.

For me the price of such treatment is too high. I am not yet quite that desperate. With some trepidation, driven by my own individual affliction, I go climbing on.

The track soon dwindles into a neglected, narrow path snaking its precipitous way up the sheer mountainside. I move slowly, keeping an even pace, eyes close to the ground, intent on each considered step. At weekly intervals I rest for a while and turn round to look back, down to the distant depths where I was born and from where my travels began. The sight is invariably intimidating, encouraging and mandatory. Intimidating, because what has always been familiar appears from here tiny, insignificant. Encouraging, because somehow I managed to come thus far. Mandatory, because I still need to keep alive the ambiguous bonds that bind me to my origins.

The path, grown over in places, indicates human presence in the not too distant past. Yet at these altitudes no other hikers are visible to my naked eye.

Materialising out of nowhere, a man of short stature and monumental presence stands engraved on a granite rock, a few yards above the path. In old fashioned climber's gear, rucksack, stick and studded leather boots, he reminds me of a senior hiking companion of my very early years. He speaks in a strong voice that still carries a great deal of conviction.

“On your own. Do it all on your own. Then, and only then, can you be sure that it's really done. Done the way it should be done, done to our satisfaction.

You cannot depend on others. Sooner or later they will let you down. When you least expect it, when you most need it.

No help is given just for love. And even love has strings attached. Strings that rob you of the freedom to act.

What you achieve by yourself, you own. The rest is worthless.”

The short speech does not betoken a conversation to come. Its tone invites no questions, permits no rejoinders. In any case, it is only a reminder of an open ended injunction imposed on my life at birth. I have known about it ever since I angrily brushed aside the helping hand of a kind aunt and first climbed, unaided, onto an adult chair.

The path peters out. The terrain is perverse. The vegetation is all wrong. Supple, thorny shoots of poisonous plants tangle round my body and impede forward movement. I struggle to free myself, only to be trapped again and again. The climb now demands an effort out of all proportion to the rate of advance. It saps the strength of my arms, legs and the will to carry on.

I do not know where I am, I have no clear idea where to turn next, yet, weakened as I am, I still persist.

A clearing at last. Lush, soft grass. Wild chestnut trees, tall, broad, in their extravagant autumn colours. A mild, late afternoon sun casts entrancing patterns of light and shade through leaves floating in an innocent breeze. A butterfly waves her glimmering wings on a belated flight. The last of the bees hover over the few remaining pollen rich flowers, on their way home. The distinctive trill of a nameless bird is heard in the far off distance. Otherwise all is still. Not a soul in sight. Except for a naked woman spread among moss covered tree roots, protruding slightly from an accommodating ground.

She is dark. Black eyes, abundant black hair on the head and high between the legs. Her olive skin is young, tender but finely polished by regular caress. The breasts are firm, ample, full of milky promise. In a cooing voice, in a cuddling voice, in a caring voice, she addresses herself to me with a familiarity which permits a hint of reproach.

"There is no way through. No way, no way, no way at all. It's no use trying. No use, no use, no use at all. But you never listen, never learn. All the signs, all the premonitions, all the warnings. You don't take any notice. No notice, no notice at all... All of you, fine, upstanding men, with everything to lose... God only knows what you hope to gain... driven by demons, you go, one after another, in search of some sort of a secret, a secret nobody knows... a secret to cure your fever, assuage all pain... and you come back, one after another, passing by here, broken little boys, in need of constant care and attention when it is far, far too late.

But you won't go, will you... you won't follow the others on this dangerous, silly, foolhardy adventure... you will stay with me, stay in the warmth, in the love of the here, in the comfort of the now... come, come let me touch you, let me kiss better your bruises, let me lick your little wounds... you'll find all the happiness you ever knew, you'll ever likely to know, right here, right here and now... there is no need to go on, no need, no need at all."

Under the shadow of that mighty tree, together she and I, break open fat, green, thorny shells and gather many new born, gleaming chestnuts, lying still moist, unsullied, in their soft twin beds.

Each one has its own display of colours, size and shape. Lovingly we hold them in the palm of our hand, rub their sheen on our skin, show them off and exchange the excitement of our amazing discoveries.

The collecting goes on and on. There seems to be no end to our greed, no limit to the pleasure, no term to the overwhelming joy.

I do not see why our game must draw to a close. I do not understand the imperative that keeps me ever on the move. All I know is that I have to leave, hurting her and me and making so painfully precious the little time we loved each other in an unsuspecting world.

She does not complain, doesn't weep. Instead, she sings to herself a nursery rhyme in a foreign tongue, not unfamiliar to my once well tutored ears.

**“Hanschen klein ging allein
in die weite Welt hinein.
Stock und Hut stehn ihm gut
ist ganz wohlgenut.
Aber Mutter weinet sehr,
hat ja nun kein Hanschen mehr.
Wünscht ihm Gluck, sagt ihm Blick:
‘kehre bald zuruck.’”**

With the strains of this brutally simple song resounding in the air, I strike out, with renewed vigour, into uncharted terrain. I am not a little Hans any more, but I am alone, terribly alone.

Looking ahead, struggling uphill, shifting scenery, meeting newcomers and watching in broad daylight the world change its face, I am not aware at first of this awesome discovery. It is when darkness falls to obliterate the colour of all the familiar sights, in the grey antechamber leading me to sleep, that I begin to realise the meaning of being by myself. No one to touch, to hold, to keep securely by my side.

I have abandoned her, she who was the first and most likely the last. As for him, he gave me his best blessing, as is the firstborn's right, and sent me out to represent his wide ranging ambitions in the world. My would be teachers did their best and then gave up. Those who offered lifelong help, I have turned down. My friends, true and loyal friends, are at a dignified distance, engaged in other quests. The casual fellows, who shared with me broken fragments of a troubled road, are now long gone.

As dusk gathers its sombre reflections into an ill defined, ominous form, it occurs to me that it is ages since I last saw a human being. Never mind family, friends, class mates and working companions, and the women I used regularly to fuck, even the sight of a complete stranger would come as something of a relief.

Another pair of hands, an upright torso moving on two legs, a face with intelligible expressions, any kind of face with any kind of expression, could help. It would allow me to believe that we have something in common, that we stand together against the rest, that we use vaguely the same language, a meaning we both share. But in this unexplored region, nobody, not even a complete stranger, is to be found.

The place is simply not fit for human habitation.

Somewhere in the middle of an uneventful night, some time later, I find my arms reach out, trying to caress a cat. I need the feel of the soft, silky fur pressed between our purring hearts. There is no cat to be had, no dog, no hamster, no myna bird to greet my homecoming, and no home awaiting my uncertain return.

The moon itself has disappeared, leaving a blind world staring in its wake. There are no moving creatures on which I can rest my eye, no ageless rocks to comfort my searching gaze. Nothing to distinguish anything from something else, just a pitch black space of endless, formless, possibilities.

The wind has died too. The leaves do not rustle, the branches do not groan . And just for once all other night ridden sounds, are inaudible to the human ear. No signals, friendly or hostile, familiar or alarmingly strange, reach me. The silence is complete. I cannot hear it.

But the ground on which I lie, sleepless, is hard. Hard enough to remind me that there is a world out there. A world to which I belong and which does not belong to me. Somewhere along the line, at the dawn of my personal history, we got separated, the world and I. And all that is left of the world is the hard ground pressing against my back. It is its outer boundary. The rest is me. Me alone.

Waves of panic, engendered from deep within, lap the crumbling shores of my elaborate defence. I twist and turn and keep arranging and rearranging myself, trying to let all of me touch the defining ground and reassure me it's still there.

I lie on one side, then on the other, I lie on my belly, I spread out my limbs, then again I tuck in my head, hunch the shoulders, pull the knees up to get myself into a well practised, elemental posture, seeking the protection of a bygone, golden age.

To no avail. Like a captured bird crashing her panicking flight into the panes of a treacherous window, so I keep beating the rising fear in my body against the impenetrable darkness of a transparent night.

Panic is advancing on all fronts. It is taking me over organ by organ, nerve by nerve. Breathing: spasmodic, shallow, hurried. Heart: loud, irregular, jumpy. Skin: sweaty. Bladder: demanding urgency. There's not much I can do. And calling for help is useless, I have ensured no one else is here to keep me company.

Being alone, I have no choice but to turn in on myself. My hands are on the move. They meet each other in space. The right hand, always the first, grasping the left. The

left one, more timid, responds. Fingers intertwined, they squeeze the shivering skin and lock themselves until they hurt. Praying in pain, they hope to exclude fear, or perhaps, just to bring some comfort and mutual aid.

Taking turns, deft fingers brush the hair, scratch the scalp, rub temples, massage the battered forehead, work with selfish devotion all around a head, a head that is still mine and yet mine no more.

For being so utterly alone, I need to keep touching myself, to feel I am still alive, still there, still the same, still recognisably me, myself. But compelled to visit and revisit old belongings, I begin to doubt whether they still belong.

Touching the sturdy, well proportioned legs. They who used to move lightning-fast, changing direction to catch everyone by surprise. Used to evade tackles, jump obstacles, and score many, oh so many, goals. Built in the best renaissance style, slender ankles, finely tuned muscles, defined knees, powerful quads barely visible under layers of rich, resilient skin, they have been a pride and joy to me since birth. We grew up together. Never a shadow of a doubt between us. But now, lying here in a cramped position, with the legs somehow in the way, suspicions arise.

Touching the hands, those squat, square, short-fingered, cunning workers who climbed tall trees and managed to hang grimly on narrow rungs of much prized ladders. The hands that argued, demanded and induced men to follow wherever I've led. Hands I have always considered to be the extension, the expression of my most incisive self. Whatever was achieved we have achieved together. Nothing has ever come between us. Yet now, in the pitch black darkness, when I need them most, they seem helpless, remote, almost alien to me.

Throughout the long night I lie uneasy in my skin. My body marks out the extent of my isolation. In so far that this body is mine, I am captured within its stark confines, vulnerable to every itch and scratch, every wound, every pain, weakness, chronic wastage and fatal deformity. Inasmuch as the body, which I inhabited with such ambiguous intimacy, isn't wholly mine, where does it leave what is left of me?

It leaves me confused, panic stricken, deep in despair, all night long.

After an age or two, and a number of false dawns, may be in answer to my despair, light is cast unto the world. Not the brilliant light of a blessed, clear, sunny, summer day. More the diffuse grey of a nondescript, weekday morning. But light enough for me to see a face reflected on the mirrorsmooth surface of an ice cold mountain lake. A lake on whose shores I lay, unbeknownst, all along the night, in the pitch black darkness.

The face staring back at me is a face in a shocking state of accelerated transformation. The lips, full and soft and set in tender curves, display the generous smile of unsuspecting youth. The nose is heavy with the accumulated flesh of unbridled

commercial intercourse. Beneath layers of ageing, leathery skin, cheekbones and temples stick out and call attention to themselves. They define blind cavities meant for eyes and suggest the outline of a skull. A skull to be exposed in the not distant future. Faint lines of philosophical doubt and practical indecision underscore a brow sloping sharply backward, saluting an old family tradition. Minute clusters of red veins discolour an otherwise healthy skin, bearing testimony to unresolved tensions that, little by little, are bound to take their inevitable toll.

But it is the eyes, least able to deceive, that give the game away. They move in bewildering gyrations from one untenable extreme to another, leaving no time, no space in between, to pause, to focus, to reflect.

At one instant, for no apparent reason, they are orbs set in the imperial mode, looking calmly over the heads of lesser men into a visionary distance, as if all things are possible, as if there is still time for everything. At the next, with the world virtually unchanged, pupils dilated, they are sights of blind panic, darting helpless from side to side, desperate to visualise a terror they can never escape.

The air is still. There is no wind, yet ripples ruffle the calm of the lake. The face folds, waves, sinks slowly, tries to surface again, again and again, then its features finally dissolve into a transparent watery grave.

A cold shiver. A creeping loss of bodily sensation. Toes and fingertips at first. A suspicion of being numb. Perhaps. Yes, no. No, yes, maybe. Then quite quickly, over a period of a few forgotten years, the loss spreads over the whole body.

So here I am. Still on the shore of that lake, between water and land. Still short of the peak, in a grey light that antecedes the night and precedes the day. Without anyone or anything that I can call my own. Aware only of being, being alone, and a fear that does not end, or ends in dying.

CHAPTER XX

THE LOWER BRAIN

When all that is left of me is the mounting anticipation of an undefined dread to come, without even the strength to raise an arm in surrender, from nowhere, the sound of human voices approaches. From weak, blurred, indecipherable beginnings, two speakers emerge, coming from opposing points of view.

“The man is at the end of his tether. Plainly, he has had enough” voice warm, protective, full of compassion.

“Oh, I don’t know. He made it to here, not many come even near. He must have something” voice bright, hard, intractable.

“Look at his state. You know what awaits him if he carries on. I just don’t think he could cope.”

“Give the man his due. You should not write him off just yet. He must have a chance. Not much of a chance, but better than most.”

“It’s so unlikely he’ll get through. And all that suffering, suffering in vain. It would be a kindness to let him turn back, to salvage from the rest of his life whatever he can.”

“And let him be half a man? That’s the trouble with turning back, you shrink and carry double the burden. Whereas, if, against the odds, still in one piece, he does make it home, he will be more than a man, he’ll be a hero.

“But we won’t know that unless he tries and if he tries it will be too late.”

“That’s right. We won’t know but, in any case, it is probably too late already.”

The dialogue continues in this vein and as it obviously concerns me, it has my full attention. Regrettably the voices fade and the rest of what is being said reaches me in whispers too faint to have any meaning.

The whispers seem to multiply and rapidly fill the surrounding air. I open my eyes to a long line of men strung up by their heels on a taut piano cord stretching across a yawning divide, between two presumed points, set far apart, somewhere in the opaque distance. Restricted to whispers, inconveniently spaced, the men must communicate by swinging in unison towards each other. Even so, they meet in close enough range only for the briefest of moments. What passes between them, there is no way of telling. But it has to be basic, brutally simple and incomplete. If

it's information of some kind, it is not even clear in which direction it is flowing, if indeed it's not flowing, simultaneously, both ways.

Confronted by an arbitrary junction, forced to make an unreasonable choice, I suffer for a while and then choose, as always when there is no choice, the option to the left.

I follow the line of the whispering, suspended, rhythmically swinging men, on the floor of the yawning divide, hoping it will lead somewhere. I am no nearer to the meaning of the sounds passing overhead, but I note in the meanwhile that the ground is more or less even, that, there are no more mountains left to climb.

For a while I live in hope. A hope that there is someone at the end of the line. Someone listening in, interested in all these whispers, able to understand and willing to help. A hope, also, that in turning left I am going in the right direction and will not have to retrace my weary steps.

After days of a dull, uneventful march, along a single, strictly prescribed track, some doubts emerge to slow down my advance. Doubts whether there is an end to the line, whether the suspended men simply go on swinging and whispering into an awful, endless, infinity.

Many more dull days of tracking, without comprehension, a single line of preposterous, whispering men. Days of hope, days of doubt. Then a fork as the line divides. Another choice which is no choice. Another turn to the left. Another junction.

It takes many such repeats for me to draw a vicious circle. I suspect, as I go, that I have been here before. This suspicion is of a permanent kind. It can neither be confirmed nor ever laid to rest. The tracks, the divides, the men, the whisperings are the same tracks, same divides, same men, same whisperings, everywhere I go.

With much misgiving, eventually, at one of the junctions, I turn right. At the next, I turn left. Then right, then left, treating the two opposites with an even hand. Just for luck. Just to be safe.

My luck doesn't change. Junction after junction, line after line. No end in sight, no prospect of resolution in view.

Lost in thought, bereft of ideas, I am stuck at one of the many junctions that I may, or may not have already passed. Not in any hurry, going nowhere, looking up idly over my head, I notice something I never noticed before. The men on the one line are, ever so slightly, more substantial than the men on the other. They seem just a shade heftier, coarser than their counterparts.

My energies rekindled, I move to the next junction. There appears to be a noticeable difference here too. I go on, following the heavier bias from now on. It may all be an optical illusion but it keeps me going. At each junction the difference persists. If

anything, it seems more pronounced. And then, quite abruptly, I come to the end of the line. Or, perhaps, to the end of all the lines.

For the place is a meeting place. A convergence of cords, of swinging men, of whispers coming and going, swirling around all the points of the compass in a bewildering flow.

The end of each line is an observation post with a small circular platform mounted just below the height of the piano cord. On the platform, a school desk and a corresponding bench. On the bench, barely within earshot of the swinging men, a human figure, roughly my age. He is busy listening, whispering and scribbling with a scholarly pen whose nib he dips, with an intermittent flourish, into an inkwell made of glass.

The coincidence of the swings, the scribbblings, the ebb and flow of the whispers, leads me to believe that what is being penned into an official looking notebook is not unconnected with some sort of privileged information passing along manifold lines.

Whenever a page of the notebook is full, the recorder rips it out, folds it skilfully into a paper dart which he launches, with uncanny accuracy, into a basket which is supposed to hold them all. Tightly woven from supple shoots of reed, the basket is of the kind used to transport choice country produce to market town some generations back, before a war that put an end to the commerce of such simple folk.

All the darts from all the posts land in the one basket and when the basket is full, it is replaced by one that is empty which, in all other respects, is the same. So there are two baskets, one that is being emptied and one that is being filled.

Two men, nondescript, in their sixties, are in charge of the baskets. They lift the one that is full, deposit the empty one in exactly the same spot and depart, holding the hoard of paper darts between them at arm's length. They, or other such men, re-emerge, carrying it back, just as the other one is full, for a repeat performance, which they go on repeating, without deviation, without cease.

In the meanwhile, and apparently unrelated to this sequence, other men, also nondescript and also of the same age, come running out of somewhere deep in the mid-region of the place. Spaced at odd intervals, they leap on and off the platforms with remarkable ease. Shouting slogans in mid leap, they retreat to whence they came from and keep returning, leaping, shouting, disappearing again. The recorders, judging by their demeanour, take careful note of these antics, especially of the slogans circulating in the air.

I stand there, under one of the observation posts, for a whole lunar month, trying to make some sense of what is going on. All this time nothing changes, the established pattern holds. Except that, very occasionally a paper dart misses its target, and, most rarely, a leaper actually falls. The errant dart is left lying on the floor. The failed leaper limps silently away. And I am just as ignorant as I was before.

My presence isn't noticed. At least, no one pays any attention to me. After a further period of prolonged waiting, spent in the discomfort of my own particular kind of anxious hesitation, I attach myself to the modest basket carrying cortege on its solemn progress centre stage.

A pair of scales dominates the place. In construction it resembles the classical instrument employed by apothecaries of old. Its skeletal body stands firmly on two solid brass feet; each of its slim, extended arms holds a concave brass plate by four independent, converging chains. From the middle of its ornamental head a prominent tongue pronounces the verdict on all that is being weighed: in balance or not.

In size, the scales are larger than life, easily capable of weighing an adult man, no matter how heavy his bones. In function, the measuring instrument is most precise. Precise enough to determine the life span of a man. To the year. To the day. To the hour.

The basket is lifted shoulder high. The paper darts are tipped into the left hand plate. The arms swing slowly out of the horizontal plane. One goes down. The other goes up, up to exactly the same degree.

Even before this movement is complete, counterweights are placed in the right hand plate to reverse the swing. The counterweights, I observe, are not weights at all. They are minute particles of dust, collected from the air, brushed into neat piles of separate colour, shape and size. Piles all ready to be scooped, in constantly varying proportions, and without any fuss, into the right hand plate.

The collecting, brushing, scooping is done by an indeterminate number of faceless, grey figures, all in the same conventional, hominoid, mould. Absorbed in their own activities, none of them seems to pay any heed to the others, yet the composition and quantity of dust is invariably just right to bring the scales into perfect balance, time and again.

At that fleeting moment, before the paper darts are tipped out and the multicoloured dust is blown clean away, when the scales are still finely balanced, one of the leapers comes running by, pauses for a split of a second, surveys the contents of the right hand plate, then goes on, running, leaping, shouting, back towards the observation posts.

The spilled paper darts are swept out of sight. A new basketful is weighed. Another leaper makes a timely pass, and the whole procedure begins all over again.

The intervals between each weighing may vary slightly, and the scales may idle for a brief moment or two, but all the other timings are uncanny. The balance is never disturbed. And when disturbed, is restored at once. Yet I can see no one in charge.

The cycle is repeated with monotonous regularity. The rhythm is sustained. No excitements. I do not know what is the object of this elaborate routine, but whatever

it is, it runs on its own, and it runs with boring fluency. So fluent, so boring, that my eyes close and I am sent into a dubious sleep of uncertain duration. The sleep of a lifetime, or just an instant of profound rest.

At any rate, I wake a troubled man. The eyelids won't lift. They want to keep out the daylight and when they can't, the eyes refuse to focus. I am afraid of seeing what I dread to see.

Everything seems to proceed smoothly. Swinging men, whispers, scribblers on the job, baskets of paper darts, leapers, piles of colourful dust, just as before. But there is something wrong. The scales are out of true.

The dust on the right hand side seldom matches the weight of the paper on the left. The arms swing round and round, the plates move up and down, never staying level long enough to enable the tongue to declare a state of perfect balance.

For no obvious reason, the unbalanced, wildly oscillating scales have a disturbing effect on my daily life. And my nightly life too. During daylight hours I am drowsy, always ready to fall asleep. As darkness falls, when I lie down to shut my eyes, I stay uneasily awake. And when, worn out, I doze off eventually in the sweet anticipation of a deeper sleep, I am abruptly yanked back into a state of a full, terrified, alert.

I lie on my back, amidst brief snatches of oblivion, and mourn the untroubled days, the dreamy nights of the last sixty years. And I grieve especially over the loss of the wonderful passage between night and day, and day and night, that had always been such a benign span of my unappreciated past.

In that past, I hardly lay a weary head on a pillow, or on a bed or on a floor of any kind, and I was out like the proverbial light. In that past, I traversed layers and layers of seamless sleep, moving easily from depths to other depths of profound inactivity. In that past I used to greet the slowly unfolding day, lazing long over half remembered and half projected dreams of intriguing complexity.

Now I am never really asleep, nor am I fully awake. I lost much of my appetite. I don't eat any more three regular meals a day. I nibble, snack, starve and then gorge myself with food I do not enjoy or even remember to taste.

Sometimes my bowels are closed for days and yield, eventually, with much reluctance, a miserly, hard substance attended by severe pain. And then suddenly there is a rush of loose, wishy-washy mess, several times on the same day.

At odd intervals I find my heart racing and my lungs pumping rapid air. Then long, sluggish periods when the heart almost stops, it's an effort to breathe, and it's a strain not to lie down. There is nothing much in between. No strong, steady beat, no even pulse, no breathing that is quiet, measured, unaware of itself.

God knows, I am no stranger to suffering, but I have not suffered like this before. Previous pains, no matter how intense, were circumscribed, anchored somewhere in

me or outside, in a hostile world. This misery has no point of reference. It is nowhere and everywhere. It hurts inside, it hurts outside, it leaves me no refuge.

From a bemused head, my eyes, still perceptive and alive, keep circling the state of my despair. Time and time again they alight on the scales. The scales which go on weighing but fail to weigh.

There is no other cue. No other tangible evidence that points to the source of my ills. Between the tolerable past and the unbearable present, the imbalance is the only material difference.

I am beginning to entertain the idea that if the scales were in balance, all would be well with me again. In the absence of all understanding, this idea takes root and develops into a suspicion. The suspicion strengthens into a belief, a belief which in turn, quite quickly, turns into an obsession. An obsession to right the scales.

What is wrong? What's happened to the timing, to the fluency? Why, all of a sudden, does dust not equal paper, why is a lifetime of self perpetuating balance so abruptly disturbed?!

The faceless, hominoid figures, are mute. They go about their business, collecting, scooping, brushing, piling minute particles of dust. They ignore the results, they ignore my plight, they ignore me.

The leapers are unstoppable. My attempts at distracting their movement are dismissed without a sideways glance. They keep on running, leaping, shouting, and paying no heed to the tongue of the scales, its imbalance, or my pain.

I climb the nearest observation post. I try to attract the attention of its occupant to the distressing state of the scales. He is too busy listening, scribbling and throwing paper darts, to take even a cursory look. I point out, as patiently as my anguish allows, that all is not well. That the weight of the dust and the weight of the paper seldom match. That the whole weighing procedure must be at fault. The recorder just shrugs his shoulders and continues his work. And thus all the recorders, on the other observation posts. They shrug their shoulders and continue, just as before, the routine of their work.

The nondescript men charged with the baskets are mere carriers of things they know nothing about. They don't scrutinise the paper, they don't read the darts. As for the swinging, whispering men, they whisper only to each other, and are immune to anybody else.

This can't go on. I cannot stand it. I yell, I cry, I scream. Summoning all that is left of my powers, I make one final appeal. But there is no one in charge, no one to care.

I relapse into the nether world of dismal speculation. What if some of the swinging men, being tired, distort the message, and instead of whispers, we now have Chinese whispers. What if the recorders, or even one of them, worn out by long years of

assiduous labour, is consistently writing down a vicious, garbled text. What if the occasional dart missing the basket, happens to be the vital one. What if the leapers are lacking their youthful zest, what if their slogans have lost their precise, meaningful edge. What if the ageing population of nondescript figures, weary of collecting, sorting, sweeping, piling endless particles of dust, have grown too careless or short sighted to see the glaring imbalance of the wretched scales. And what if the scales themselves have acquired a bias, the bias of the insane.

All of these ifs are possible, and any one of them may be sufficient in itself to wreak havoc with my life. Sufficient to destroy the me I used to love, the me I used to know.

The worst of it is the unsettling uniformity of the performers' age: whisperers, recorders, carriers, leapers, pilers of dust, each and every one of them appears to be as old as I am, old enough to begin to feel the natural wear and tear of an oncoming, hesitant age.

My yelling, my crying, recrimination, protests, are over. Only the torment remains.

And the torment is now more intense. It has accumulated a painful multiplicity of sleepless nights and tired days, unappetising, demented meals, unyielding bowels that open with a violent rush, arbitrary storms of a panic stricken heart and other disturbing bits and pieces of a life on edge. All together, they have reduced me to a fuzzy shadow of my former, once formidable self.

I still believe that if the scales could be made to work evenly once more, that if the balance somehow were to be restored, my life would be worth living again. But I am too weak to try to find a way. Too tired to ask for mercy from those too preoccupied to notice me and acknowledge that there is a fatal flaw.

I still cannot quite believe that there is no one in charge, no final arbiter, no ultimate court of appeal. But, for all my entreaties, no such authority has emerged to impose itself on the self perpetuating scene. Not even to say a categorical "no".

I have resigned myself to suffering. To suffering the pain. The pain in its multiplicity, its waves of mounting intensity, its refined range of subtle cruelties, in all its fearsome waves.

Helpless, imprisoned in the school of pain, a diligent student of suffering, I slowly learn not to ask questions. I simply note what is taking place.

At first I have a vague hope that some pattern might emerge. A pattern of pain to give me a clue. An understanding of sorts not to escape the hurt, just perhaps be better prepared to feel the fearsome wounds. Having studied reams after reams of self administered notes and juggled all kinds of numbers that refuse to work, I have given up any such hopes. There seems no way of anticipating when, and where, and how the next blow will fall.

Only the scales are predictable. Whenever I have a respite, an extended moment of calm, long enough for me to appreciate a previous life, the instrument is in balance. Its arms, chains and plates swing wildly, out of control, at all other times.

Devoid of strength, diminished in will and size, much simplified, I submit. And grudgingly, against all my instincts, I am taught, over a few corrosive years, to accept, to welcome, to embrace, the pain.

I have given up. I am ready to drown in my own personal, private sea of suffering. I am drifting in the misery of my pain. Nothing to haul me up, nothing to hold me back.

I surrender. I let go. Farewell I. Farewell me.

An interval. I don't know how long an interval, but there must have been an interval because I am conscious of coming back to myself. Back from nothing. Back from nowhere. Back from far away. Back from over the brink. The brink of something else, something altogether different.

And I am coming back not on my own. I am being carried in arms strong, gentle and soft. Arms that must have saved me in the last resort. Saved me from drowning in my private sea of suffering. Saved me on the point of surrender, when I gave up. As I let go.

Safe in the arms of a porter way beyond my grasp, I regain my composure and listen to a disturbingly familiar dialogue of the two dissenting voices. Voices I have heard at critical times before.

"You can't carry him forever. It is time to let him stand on his own two feet" the voice is harsh.

"After what he has been through we can't be sure the poor man will ever stand" the voice caresses, warms.

"Where he is heading, no one can help but himself."

"He would not be here at all without the care, the love, the attention of the others, the ones who were with him from birth."

"True. But all that matters here is raw courage. Nothing else will save him. Nothing else will get him through."

"It is such a pity. It should never have come to this. No man should be asked to take such insane risks. He was not meant to endure his own worst extremities."

"Yet someone, somewhere must have decided that he should try to go all the way."

"He is weak. He's fragile. Already half out of his mind with fear. Without the stupid arrogance of youth, how long can he last, how far can he reach?"

"He has reached thus far, much further than we expected. His resolve, the reserves of his strength, the quality of his courage, can only be measured when they are put to the final test."

The dialogue comes to an end. The voices die away. I find myself between two gothic gateways. There seems nothing to choose between them, except that one is to my left, the other to my right. There are no gates in place, entry is free. I would like to go through both, but this is not possible. Following my lifelong habit, I move left.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LEFT HEMISPHERE

Going under the pointed arch, I see ahead of me a succession of similar gateways, ranged one behind another, in strict order of magnitude. All is symmetry, proportion and order.

The last one, of monumental proportions, forms the entrance to an edifice which defies description in the convention of linguistic terms. It has an ecclesiastical smell, but it is not a church. It is furnished with the tools of administration, but it is not an office. It is enveloped in an academic aura, but it is not a university. It has all the appurtenances of the law, but it is not a courtroom. It reeks of bureaucracy, but it is not a seat of government. It houses none of these institutions, yet, in its sheer architecture, it could easily act as a host to them all.

A natural light, let in through no window because windows there are none, illuminates the precinct, people, and all proceedings. Everything and everybody is sharply defined. There are no blurred edges, no murky corners, no fluff, no soft outlines, no women, in the place.

Given neither the time nor the consideration to adjust to these unfamiliar surroundings, I am confronted by one of the numerous officials, all busy, all preoccupied, all seemingly hard at work.

“We hoped you would not come to see us” a disembodied voice, without discernible emotion, lends to the words an air of discouraging finality. With the raise of a hand he arrests my as yet unformulated justifications and, unperturbed, continues his personal address. “We realise your coming here is not a matter of idle curiosity. In some ways, it would be a lot easier to deal with your inquiry if it were. It is the driven ones, those who absolutely insist on knowing, that are difficult to satisfy. You are desperate to have all the answers. We shall, naturally, do our best to help. But as you are well aware, we are not here to examine our own internal workings. First and foremost we have to deal with the material that keeps pouring in from the outside, and, using all the waking hours, we can barely cope with that.”

He is right. Why should they interrupt their habitual work and attend to me. Much as I hate it, I shall have to beg. Reluctantly, I assemble the pathetic elements

of a heartrending plea: my private and public torments, my personal doubts, my unreasonable expectations, my despairing search. The metallic voice of the official cuts off any chance I may have had to deliver a reasoned, undignified, request.

“Don’t bother us with the details of your story. We know all about your troubles, your comings, your goings, your aspirations. We have heard your whispered prayers and listened to your anguished speculation. We have prepared the list of questions you are so anxious to ask.”

I am led by the official through a network of systematic corridors, across numerous bifurcated junctions, to the interior of what appears to be a mausoleum. The faded, moss covered inscription on one of its stone walls reads:

DEATH - WHY? WHY DOES IT HAUNT ME SO?

DEATH - WHEN? IS THERE TIME ENOUGH?

DYING - HOW? IN WHAT TERRIFYING FORM?

LIVING - HOW? IN FACE OF MULTIPLE TERRORS, SUCHLIKE?

LIFE - HOW? HOW TO LOVE WHAT IS ABOUT TO BE LOST?

LIFE - HOW? HOW TO ACCEPT THE LOSS OF WHAT I LOVE MOST?

**LIFE - WHAT FOR? WHY BUILD A LIFE WHEN IN
THE END NOTHING REMAINS?**

Silence. Silence by the official, silence by me, silence between us and the undated inscription on the wall.

Lost for words, lost in thought, I shield my eyes for a moment. When I look up again I see right in front of me, standing by an ornate baroque lectern, another official. This second figure is not unlike the first, who has receded in his turn and is now a mute part of a sombre background. The base of the lectern carries a simple plaque, enunciating in prominent iron letters the august title “EX CATHEDRA”. Which I take to mean that the words emanating from behind this lectern are not to be challenged.

And words do emanate. They are uttered by this second official in the clipped, categorical, impassive tone that seems to be a feature of the local dialect.

“These questions are not very original. They have been with us, in one form or another, almost from the very beginning. We don’t like to spend too much time on them. Some are not rigorously formulated. Some have no practical value. The answer to others are not yet available. It is even in doubt whether these sort of questions should be permitted here.

Before we let your expectations grow out of all proportion, you'd best be told what this place is all about. We have our eyes and ears all around the neighbourhood. Our informants, our spies, you might say" a little grudging smile is allowed to accompany the last half sentence. Humour, even of the driest sort, isn't much in evidence. "Messengers bring us a constant stream of news, so we are well up with what is going on. All news is sifted, ranked and classified. Only then does our work really begin.

We examine, we compare, we analyse. We select, we reject. We do not theorise, we go strictly by the evidence. Above all else, we deduce. From the facts before us, exercising our unique faculty, we draw infallible conclusions. We simply deduce the truth."

But what if the eyes are deceived just a shade, what if the ears sometime miss one or two notes at the higher frequencies?! What if the occasional messenger betrays his trust, what if he fails, what if he delivers damaged, distorted goods?! I look back to recall a previous place, where basketful of paper darts were weighed on a pair of monumental scales. And I remember the rare dart that missed the basket, the odd leaper who missed his leap.

When I look up again, I find the second official replaced by a third one, in a similar vein. In his right hand he holds a billiard cue. The lectern is gone. Slowly, deliberately, in the same categorical voice, the third official takes up the word.

"Given your personal loathing of contradiction, it is inevitable that you should be preoccupied with death. Your love of history stretches far back to relive biblical events and reanimate the childhood years of your own parents' life. Your dynastic vision reaches forward to plot the careers of grandchildren as yet to come. You are playing an unending game between an eventful past and a challenging future, whilst you, yourself, are miserably confined to an insignificant fraction of the vast, moving reality that lies within the domain of your own, forward and backward looking, eyes. And one fine day the infinite past and the unlimited future will shrink to just one dying moment. The last dying moment of your voracious self. To be both such a master and such a subject, at the same time, you find that impossible to accept."

The billiard cue, in the third official's hand, points to a curious painting, whose convex surface seems to form a small segment of a giant sphere. In the forefront, legs astride, dominant on a throne, a naked lady is giving birth to a distorted globe of mercury. The mirrorsmooth skin of the globe reflects and magnifies its surrounds, so that everybody and everything in the picture, apart from the globe, appears twice, facing in and facing out, up and down, left and right.

To the left of the throne, on a lake frozen over, amidst hillocks of brilliant white snow freshly fallen, a young girl, still almost a child, is skating fast. Against the

background of a clear blue sky, she is accompanied by complementary figures, of the same age and grace, all of them, together, describing an audacious dance.

To the right of the throne, an old woman, with a broom made of dead twigs in her wizened hands, is sweeping away yesteryear's snow. She is dressed in black. She is alone. The stuff on the ground is sodden, heavy and isn't white any more. A coating of miscellaneous dirt has turned most of its exterior grey, leaving patches of brown for the spattering of mud, and streaks of bright yellow where dog, horse, boy and man relieved themselves. The sky behind her is overcast, laden with grief.

There are some other details there which I feel I should discern, but in moving closer to it, the picture appears transformed. Nothing of what I have seen so far is lost.

Throne, lady, skaters, old woman, snow of different sorts, are still clearly visible. It is just that the painting, as a whole, depicts a human eye and every part of it belongs to the eye's orbital anatomy.

The mercurial globe, newly formed, protruding from the throne, is the iris, which is luminous and mirrors everything inside. Perversely, the pupil in its centre is black, reflects nothing and admits only that which is outside the picture, that which is irrelevant. The peripheral images, around the iris, appear to float in a shallow film of tears, on the finest, barely visible, net of reddish blue veins.

For the time being the official and the billiard cue are still. Not a word is spoken. Obviously, I am supposed to study the work, to discover meanings, to establish relationships. Maybe even find a clue to what's wrong, to what's ailing me.

The lady is beautiful but is she afraid? She has just given birth but is she still afraid? She has given birth, but not to a child. Was she expecting a child?

The lady is lovely but is she sad? Is she disappointed because instead of seeing her child, she now sees herself? Herself in the skating girl, in the company of as yet unblemished friends, speeding on the unresisting ice, dancing through the still perfect snow, without fear, without regret? Herself in the old woman, alone, vainly trying to sweep away the contaminated sediments of untold, unused years, with no hope, no desire left?

The lady is voluptuous yet she is pensive. She is not looking expectantly at an unseen admirer, coming at the height of his powers to meet a queenly wish. Her eyes are lowered to the iris of the other eye, absorbed in the images of her selves, as she was, as she will be, and, overriding everything, as she is now.

Yes, of course I know that portraits capture a particular moment in time, that true ones reach beyond the recall of a single, casual memory, that royal ones have always ulterior designs. I also know that this painting is altogether different. Every separate detail appears twice, in converse orientations, each image confronting its double.

Except the mercurial middle, the single iris of an all seeing eye, with its black pupil, which is blind only to its own self.

The picture identifies one single moment, an act of birth. That's why the globe is as yet imperfect. But, in paradox, it also moves across a whole lifetime, from an impervious girlhood to a remorseful old age. And yet that lifetime, all seventy years of it, are there in the beautiful lady's eye, in her fearful, sad, voluptuous, pensive look, as she becomes aware, for the first time, of the grotesque enormity of her own life.

Or, at any rate, so it appears to me from where I stand, in silence, contemplating the work. That is the trouble. Everything turns on a moving point of view. The skating girl aims towards the right but, on reflection, is seen gliding left. The old woman, the same again. The lady herself looks down on what she has just produced, and thence looks up to see the doubtful reaction in her own eyes.

It all depends on where in the picture you position yourself. Unless, of course, you have a privileged access through the eye of the painter who painted the painting, who first played the game, decided the rules, and then simply deserted the scene.

"You have missed the whole point," declares the third official, billiard cue hovering in mid-air, "the painter is inside the painting, he is still working on the unfinished picture, he has always been there."

I am taken aback. I felt at first sight the work to be different from all the others I had ever seen in my life, but I assumed, unthinking, an easel, a brush, the hand of a master no longer there. I cannot make sense of the official's remark. Involuntarily I strain my eyes to try and discover somewhere within the picture an elusive presence that had hitherto escaped my eye.

"The picture, although unfinished, is complete," continues the official in a prosaic tone of voice "which naturally means the painter as well. Without him there is no work, and the work, after all, is entirely for his own benefit.

In common with so many others, you have failed to understand that there is no privileged eye, over and above this space, noting from some lofty height the past, the future, the ongoing, history of time.

You may transport yourself to biblical encounters and traverse, with affection, with aversion, sixty years' worth of undisputed memories. And, having constantly in mind some impending, inevitable end, you may occupy yourself, perhaps far too much, with anticipating tomorrow's uncertain events. What you can never do is to step outside, beyond yourself, beyond Space, beyond the flow of Time.

No matter how distant, everything is here and now. There is nothing apart from you and you are part of all that you comprehend. You will go on dying but you will never be there, at the death."

These words, whose meaning I am not sure I understand, provide a degree of unexpected comfort. Is there then no inconsistency between the me who bestrides the Infinite and the me, whose paltry, unaccomplished life is fast drawing to a troubled end? Is the distinction between me and everybody else, the dead and buried, all those who will be there long after I am gone, is this distinction whilst practically useful, whilst emotionally disturbing, in the last resort, false? Is the past merely compounded of memories, is the future just a catalogue of visions? Memories and visions carried in a constantly shifting present, a present lodged in a notoriously inconsistent self? Are all the things and people I have accumulated so far, things and people I am doomed to leave forever behind, of so little substance? Is it really so unreasonable of me to mourn my own, unhoped for, demise?

These and other subsidiary questions line up, waiting impatiently to be asked, but the third official is already on his way. Waving pointedly the billiard cue at me, he leaves a last brief reference to the painting trailing in his wake: "Don't forget that the pupil in the centre of the iris is black."

The fourth official is sitting behind a makeshift desk, made up of slabs of stone pillaged from family graves of diverse descent. We are still in the mausoleum, but no picture, no cue, no lectern. Voice, manner, delivery much as before.

"We have no information as to the exact time of death. At least not sufficient to make an accurate prediction. We almost never do. Family, race, life style, give some indication, but there are simply too many unknowns. Not to mention accidents."

I am much relieved. That final appointment with destiny, if it were set, and made known to me, would become a cruel point of reference. A reference to transfix each passing day, as my life ebbed, in measured units of precious waste, regrettably, away.

"Is there time enough?" in mock doubtful tones the official echoes the inscription on the wall, "There is never enough time to make good the waste, to accomplish the task, to realise the dreams, to say all the things still left unsaid. No, there is never enough time to finalise the monument to your own personal immortality. You will have probably noted that even the tombs of the great Pharaohs were left incomplete. But to prepare yourself for the final act, perhaps there might be just enough time for that. We cannot guarantee anything, of course, and much will depend on you, yourself. On how you spend the little time that you are spared."

Don't you know what I have been doing these last few years?! Don't you take account of just how far I have neglected all that I once was, all that I used to do?! What do you imagine I am doing here?! Would you have me retire to a clinic, withdraw to a monastery and do nothing but contemplate the end?

"Nor do we have, as yet, any worthwhile indications as to how you will actually die." Ignoring my little outburst, the official moves on to the next question. "In any

case, this matter is of very little interest to us. Cancer, heart attack, senile dementia, or breaking your neck, will all do equally well. A little more or less suffering, the degree of inconvenience or even how you take your final leave, makes no real difference.”

Well, to me it does. It makes all the difference. I am terrified of dying in pain, after an age of acute discomfort with my dignity in shreds. I would like to believe that I can still do something to ensure that when it comes to dying, I shall die well.

“As for the rest of your questions,” the fourth official continues looking through me, as if I wasn’t there “some are to do with feelings. And feelings are not our concern. To invest your love in your imminent loss, quite frankly, does not make sense. But then love, and hate, desire and fear, and other such aberrations, seldom do. They have no place here. If you are troubled on their account, you must deal with it, elsewhere.”

The fourth official is gone. I have the impression of being dismissed, but before I have the time to gather myself for any kind of a move, yet a fifth official appears. There is nothing to distinguish him from those officiating before, except that he holds an actor’s tragic mask in front of his face. We are still in the mausoleum, in plain view of the seven heavy questions inscribed on the wall, but we are now both standing on the boards of a makeshift stage.

“Of course, you may assume the role of the architect and present your life as a splendid edifice, built for his own use. And you could even claim, with some justification, that at the end of the painstaking work, nothing tangible remains.” Thus proceeds the fifth official in a matter-of-fact voice, with hardly a trace of irony.

“It makes for good theatre. Two diametric opposites: A hardplayed, hardworked life, pieced together by a myriad of individual actions, each respecting, reflecting its entirety, and nothing at the end of it. The child informing the man, the father prefiguring the son, the wise old fool justifying the boy, each answerable to each, a life of true integrity, with a final value, set precisely at nought. Such a tragedy.”

It is. But for me it’s not theatre, it is not a play. It is a life I am struggling to live, even though I cannot quite see the reason why.

“A dilemma posed in terms of so violent a polarity, is bound to have its resolution in a tragedy. There is nothing remarkable in that. If you define an individual’s life as a self-contained, coherent, complete entity, and define his death as final, what else do you expect?!”

No, it’s not a matter of definitions. I am not so presumptuous as to define life and death. Ever since I remember, I have been compelled so to act that my actions have a past and a future. A past and a future which belongs to the self same life, a life that always tries, often without success, to form itself into some sort of unity. As for death, I’d love to think it’s not final, I just don’t know how.

“But, obviously, there is no earthly reason to conceive of life and death in such stark, dramatic terms. It may be sufficient to live an episodic life, barely held together by disjointed events of no great moment, without any reference to a great single, significant whole.

And just how terminal death is, is still open to debate. We need not go over the arguments, they are too well rehearsed.

At any rate, there is no intrinsic contradiction here. How you should face death, why struggle to live the rest of your overambitious life, is a matter really for you, not for us, to decide.”

I do not actually witness his disappearance, but the fifth official is gone. So is the inscription on the wall of the mausoleum, which itself has vanished too. No sixth official appears on the scene. The audience, if that is what it was, is over. Once more I am deprived of familiar landmarks. Once more I am lost.

“Strictly speaking, it is a matter of choice. I mean whether to go on living... or not...” the words are distinct although delivered in a deep murmur, by someone concealed behind my right shoulder. When I turn my head, he moves with the turn, keeping his distance from the back of my head. I cannot see him, but I know he is there. What I don’t know is for how long has he been lurking in my movement. Does he belong to the place, does he go with the territory, or is he assigned to me, under some sort of longer term contract.

“In theory, you could end it at any time. It need not be anything brutal... anything violent... anything painful. After all, we both know you are terrified at the mere thought of hanging yourself, or jumping off a roof, or drowning, or blowing your head off. We are not talking of any such singular acts which require raw, male courage. These, in any case, are way beyond you. There are, fortunately, nowadays quite simple, easy, pleasant ways to reach the same conclusion. With the connivance of a witchdoctor, or the wonders of medical science, you may drift off, on a cocktail of sophisticated drugs, through euphoric dreams, straight into eternity.”

But even so, the swallowing of some seemingly innocuous pills, when it is the final act of a conscious will, requires a modicum of bravery. The kind of bravery I do not have. And then, even in the darkest hour, there is the force of this childish curiosity, this manic belief that the best, the most amazing, is still to come.

“I am not suggesting” the shadowy figure insinuates from somewhere behind my back “that you do anything of the sort. It is merely worthwhile to remark that the officials are right in attributing to you a final choice. As for the rest, I hope you were not taken in by a marvel of optical illusions. Or by the inspired idea of a painter still beaver away inside the painting. We do know, don’t we, that there is a real world out there... and that one day, all too soon, you will die... leaving friends, wife,

half finished work, the children you nursed and planted... everything in place, living without you, more or less as before..."

Just now, I only know that I have lost my footing, that I am not even sure of the ground on which I am to place my very next step.

"It would be a great relief not to have to bear constantly in mind the final parting, the coming decline... but isn't it a little too late to betray the pain and fear that fashioned what you have most valued throughout a life of such underachievement?

The officials here are, of course, all reasonable men. They do reasonable work. They reason a great deal and, on the whole, they reason well. They should, because they do nothing else. Like all officials, whilst denying responsibility, they claim all knowledge of the relevant facts. As such a claim is impossible to sustain, they resort to tricks... pictures to deceive the eye... words to confuse the thinking mind."

And what about insidious murmurs, casting doubts from the shadows behind, murmurs voiced by someone without a face, without a clear identity, without a track record, without any credentials. I do not want to listen to these murmurs, but the murmurs persist.

"What did these well informed sources tell us about the scales, the scales that went so horribly wrong? The scales that have teased your daily and nightly life out of balance, inflicting extremes of pain and fear? What light did they shed on the messages that went missing, the messengers corrupted on the way? What insight did these sophisticated, knowledgeable officials provide as to the nature of the weighing process, the attendants involved, and where it all takes place? A place more ancient, more universal, than their own bureaucratic maze. Nothing. No explanation, no insight, nothing at all."

True. I did have some such expectation. I did have a vague hope if not for a complete answer, at least an indication of what has gone so woefully wrong. Since they seemed to know so much about me, it is especially disappointing that they never referred to the cruel imbalance, never mentioned my sufferings on the perverted scales.

As against that, the painting was a surprise. It reaches way beyond any arguments, it carries more power than the power of words. I have retained it, and, despite all the murmuring shadows, I am resolved to carry it with me, wherever I'll go.

"Have you forgotten, by any chance, that you are labouring in the lands of fear? Can you trust these cold, calculating men of reason here, here where reason counts hardly at all? Isn't it passing strange to appeal for their help in aid of an ailing heart, as they sit collecting... sifting... examining... classifying... comparing and assembling tiny broken fragments of some dubious material into fancy facts?! Surely, even you must realise by now that it's hopeless to expect them to answer questions inspired by an anguish they cannot feel, never mind understand?!"

The murmur is getting louder, the presence behind my shoulder feels more defined. It is still a moving shadow, but, from time to time, I catch a glimpse of him from the corner of my eye.

There is much truth in what he says, but it's an adversarial kind of truth which sides only too readily with downright lies. Besides, beyond my suspicions, I know nothing of the man. From the murmurings it would appear that he has been following me for quite some while. But is he a native of the place, with some local knowledge which could prove invaluable? Or has he been attached to me, unbeknownst and unsuspected, from the very beginning of the climb? Or even, perhaps from before that...

"Are you still intent on discovering the source of your ills? Still desperate to face what you have so cleverly managed to dodge so far? Because if you are, you'll have to turn back, you'll have to retrace your steps and make an altogether more difficult choice."

Given all that went before, given what he must have seen me do, and seen done to me, the questions are surely rhetorical. The man in the shadows is almost mocking me.

In any case, I am given no time to think. Without a single voluntary act, I find myself walking backwards, as if leaving the majestic presence of an oldfashioned king. My shadow doesn't follow me, I am trailing him.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RIGHT HEMISPHERE

We leave behind the neat symmetry, the hierarchical structures, the orderly succession of orders, the brotherhood of uniform officials, the clear light, the measured, polished words, the well documented statements, innumerable catalogues of facts, self-possession, control and the whole discipline of it all.

We leave all that, without a forward glance, backing into I don't know where, backing I have no idea how far.

The last signpost I recognise is the gothic arch, through which I entered sometime in the recent past. We stop there in our tracks, and without hesitation turn to go through the other gothic arch, its twin, to the right. It is the turning I did not take when last faced with an arbitrary choice.

Once through the arch, looking back, I see it's not an arch at all, gothic or otherwise. It is a large, ragged, shapeless gap in an undefined, irregular wall. The missing apex, reaching towards the sky, the utter lack of any design, symmetry, proportion, has an unsettling effect.

The light is variable. Occasionally, for brief periods, it's that of a dull, ordinary day when everything around me is clearly visible and, unhindered by the sun, I can see into the far distance. At other times, it is pitch black. A black interrupted by brilliant flashes of a bright colour, when whatever I see appears, for a moment, luminous. Mostly, the light is in transition, moving unpredictably across innumerable shades of grey.

The pervasive silence is too still, waiting to be broken at any time. The sounds, when they come, are pitched at random frequencies, without pattern, from all directions. Words, cries, screams, wailing both in human and inhuman form.

Orientation is difficult. The only reliable sense here is the sense of smell. And the place reeks of danger.

Blood is coursing faster in my veins. Feelings rise. Heart pounds. Nerves are stretched. General excitement. I don't know where I am, what is around me, what is to happen next. I have been brought here without previous consultation, I am not in charge. The excitement, which could go either way, turns quickly into fear.

Standstill. For the time being, I am not moving. The scent of danger inclines me to flee but the scent is all around me, I don't know where to run. Unable to stand still, I set out to find my bearings. To identify sights and sounds that lie ahead, behind and to either side of where I imagine I am meant to be.

Despite the variable light, playing havoc with appearances, I realise soon enough that I am standing on the edge. But on the edge of what ?

After many unsatisfactory attempts to recognise a place that has some disturbing familiarities, one flash of illumination reveals a cemetery. A cemetery of the dying and the dead.

The remains of a once redoubtable primeval forest have been commemorated in the pitiful form of a scattered army of desiccated stumps. Stumps bereft of arms, standing ragged in a sea of stagnant, shallow waters. The stark, distinct shape of what's left of each hefty trunk, the truncated branches, a patch of dense moss here and there, serve as painful reminders of the magnificent individuals that stood here mighty, for centuries.

Against the dead and dying trees, the shallow, stagnant waters show morbid signs of life. Large predatory birds perch expectantly on the wooden husks, gazing on the water, ready for anything. The peculiar, unfavourable light permits an occasional glint of submerged creatures coming up for a short, sharp sniff of stale air, a glint sufficient to impress upon me that they are fast, ferocious, unpredictable.

The shortage of light discourages plants which flower in rich, bright colours. The absence of a moderately dry soil rules out strongly rooted perennials. What there is of vegetation is an incoherent mass of water born, unstable, convoluted shoots, dangling in the water. It stifles healthy, daytime life and produces flowers of a hideous nocturnal beauty, to captivate and torment all those condemned to come hereabouts.

The edge, on which I have been standing now for quite awhile, hesitant to move, is not hard and fast. The divide between water and dry land, which marks the boundary of the dead and the dying, is in the habit of shifting. Not a great deal and not all the time. But enough for me to notice that my feet are sometimes wet, sometimes covered in mud, at other times dry and set firmly on solid ground.

The whole scene, at least what I can make out from insubstantial sights and transient sounds, random and unrelated, is highly disturbing. My instinct is for flight. But in what I had to endure in getting thus far, my instinct has lost much of its original force. And the intense curiosity of an untamed child still tempts me to plunge right in, damn the consequence.

I cannot flee. I do not have the audacity to enter the burial ground nor the nerve to stand still and calmly survey the scene. So I am forced to do what I have been doing most of my life: creep along the edge.

Even so, taking one exploratory step at a time, I find it hard to keep track. Days of wading knee deep in the water are followed by days of trudging through mud. Slushy, squelchy, oozing mud. Crusty, hard edged, dried out mud. Mud bearing imprints of man and beast and other things, things which are neither man nor beast but something in between.

The imprints are scattered all over the place, intermingled, in disarray, showing no other pattern than confusion, violence and terminal pain.

The boundary between the dead and the living, in constant shift, ill defined, is the principal place of commerce between them. It is where it all happens. Where they meet. Where they struggle. Where the dying is done.

Creeping along the edge, I note the imprints. I attend to strange, discordant, ominous, sounds. I catch sight of a torn branch crashing into the water. I see lumbering birds flap their wings prior to take off. I watch the jaws of a legendary reptile yawn in slow motion. I sense the lingering presence of preceding, now unhappily departed men. And from a thousand such trivial details I conjure up scenes of life and death struggles, varied scenes with fine variations, none of which I could have witnessed, all ending badly, all possible, all lying in wait for a central figure, who may, so easily, turn out to be me.

These struggles generally last a long time, although the onset is sudden and rarely expected. Typically, the victim may be wandering somewhere near the edge, unaware of his whereabouts, oblivious to the moving boundary, when something happens. All at once he is trapped, he has become part of a fatal encounter, an encounter he has not sought, has not envisaged, cannot escape.

All the signs are that the victim is caught by surprise. He may be asleep, or just tired, weary of his travels. Distracted, he wouldn't notice the cemetery moving, the waters rising, an insidious plant coiling itself around his stationary ankles, or the bite of a minute insect on his exposed neck. And even when he becomes aware of what has happened, the chances are that he would try to dismiss the event as of no significance.

Yet the onset of the forlorn battle may be marked by nothing more than that. The fever, growing entanglement, lack of air, loss of movement, the hovering birds, the silent predators, follow as a natural sequence.

Still making my way, with exaggerated caution, along the narrow edge, I come across some similarities with what I saw, heard and sensed before. The similarities are striking and occur at more or less regular intervals. It takes me awhile to realise that what I am experiencing are not similarities. They are repetitions of the same scene, the same imprints, the very same place. I am simply moving in a circle.

The land of the living is an island in the sea of death. Or, death is a finite cemetery, circumscribed by life. I have no means on knowing which is which.

Be that as it may, to distance myself from the dying, to gain some respite from living on the edge, I have to cut the vicious circle, I have to break the spell. Dredging silted memories of generations gone, I find a young boy imprisoned in a circle drawn on a hard, city pavement in deadly white chalk. He spits into the palm of his right hand, shuts his eyes, spins round thrice and, in one courageous bound over the line, is free.

I accomplish this move with surprising simplicity. There is no transition. In less than a moment, all around me, it is spring.

Trees, newly sprung from an unfrozen ground, are in bud. The buds are already unfurling themselves into clusters of tender leaves. Blossoms everywhere. The air has a smell, and the smell is intoxicatingly fresh. Multicoloured birds, small, vociferous, harmless, take wing on ornate mating flights. Nests in all shapes, forms and sizes, are being cleverly built in the twinkling of an eye. There are browns, yellows, reds, a few blues and some other tones of brightness, but the dominant colour is green. An exuberant kind of green, a green that has within it all the desirable hues and shades of living things.

On the ground, the space between the trees is dotted with red deer, the bucks standing calmly, head high, necks turned back, antlers proud, noble, magnificent. As they sense no danger, no danger is about.

Of humans, there are no males. And the females, although not beautiful, are all agreeable and young. Young in that they are fully formed and covered in a velvetsoft skin, a bodice wholly unstressed. Young in that they are ready for the defining moment which is still ahead. Swinging on a branch, or leaning lightly against a trunk, each one is different but their smile is one and the same. It is a tentative invitation for the opening scene.

An ape is hunched over a chequered board, all set for a pleasant game of chess. The hostile armies, carved permanently in stone, are drawn to face each other. The pieces are still in place, white hasn't yet made the opening move.

The lucid waters of a narrow brook are running strongly through the wood, intent on carrying a fleet of turtles who are doing their best to swim against the current. The stream flows, the rebels, in their fancy shells, row mightily and in a precarious balance. Thus the fleet keeps its station, moving but unmoved.

On the mossy banks, well spaced out, a crowd of undisciplined frogs leap up and down, celebrating an eventual event which will demonstrate with conclusive finality that nothing will ever change.

An octet of string instruments is poised to give a concert, without the help of any human agency or the benefit of musical notes. Bows drawn, violin, viola and cello are all tuned to the conductor's baton, a conductor and baton that are seen not to be there.

Privileged numbers, in their prime, count their blessings and endow each seventh creature and one in every thirteen trees with a significance beyond their wildest dreams.

An endless scroll of illuminated words winds and unwinds itself, displaying an original text in which each phrase is repeated with sufficient frequency to soothe an astonished eye. The reader, present, absent or ghostly, is taken aback because the ever changing manuscript is evidently novel, yet the words, the illuminated words, are archaic and manifestly the work of a monkish hand. Judicious repetition, even at random intervals, is of great comfort in the absence of meaning or a meaning too elusive to grasp.

A single dragonfly, hugely magnified, is hovering ahead. Her body bright purple, her wings a pale, metallic bronze. She appears to be still, yet glides with lightning speed to criss-cross every square inch of the whole blessed place. As evidence of her flight path, she leaves trailing in her wake a silken thread of many dazzling colours, all of which, in a certain light, are transparent. The thread, thin, tenuous, a prey to the slightest breeze, forms an intricate web to capture every single outstanding feature of the landscape. It touches lightly on the branches and leaves, it rests on the points of the antlers of the retrospective deer, it encompasses the mating flight of the multicoloured birds, it reaches under the water, to hold together the turtle fleet, it rises and falls with the leaping of the frogs, it outlines all the possible moves of king, queen, bishop and knight, it links the silent musical instruments with the resonant prime numbers and the numbers with the archaic, illuminated words.

On this web of thin, tenuous, transparent threads, I climb, weightless, without effort, without trying, without any forethought, I climb and keep on climbing, higher and higher, and higher still.

I pass the tops of the tallest trees, I surpass the upper reaches of the birds' mating flight and go on to an altogether loftier height. A height from which I see at once the whole universe in which I now reside.

I see the young woods, the clear waters of the brook, the creatures who belong there as of an ancient historical right. I see the games they are constrained to play, the numbers, the instruments being assembled to make music, the words being fashioned to name the unborn.

I see all that and much, much more. I reach into the heart of each and every living thing, to determine the same and not the same. What is common and what is unique. What is permanent and what is subject to change.

I see why they are what they are, and how everything relates. I see with sudden certainty. I see with a spontaneous conviction that tolerates no shadow of doubt.

From that height, I discover by chance, I can manipulate time. That is to say, bring events forward or delay their occurrence for almost as long as I like. In effect, I find it possible to bring time to a virtual halt.

To my surprise, when time stands still, everything in my world continues to move at its natural pace. It is just that nothing ages, nothing dies, nothing decays.

The trees are growing, they have more branches, the branches bring forth new shoots, their trunks acquire girths of substance, but they stay young and it is still spring.

The mating birds have mated, the nests are full of eggs, the eggs have hatched, soft down spreads everywhere and mating flights go on soaring into a clear, blue sky.

The antlers of the red deer are locked in battle, but the battle obeys the strict rules of a well established game. The loser yields ground, is not killed, is not damaged, will find another patch and another, if perhaps less desirable, mate.

Some of the turtles have moved further upstream, others are carried downwards, but they are still in formation, the frogs are still cheering, and the waters are sweet, unsullied, crystal clear.

A game of chess is in progress. The ape is playing white, his opponent, responding in black, is, unremarkably, me. Once a piece is touched, it has to move. Once released by the hand, it has to stay in place. But there is no clock, no time pressure. Well past the opening, having diverged from the book, the position is unusually complicated. Both black and white seem to have endless possibilities, all promising, all involving an element of risk. Both of us, the ape and I, are scratching our heads and taking our time. The outcome, if there be an outcome, is uncertain. We are in no hurry, we do not mind that there is no end in sight.

The octet of string instruments is in rehearsal. The composer of the work is unknown, there are still no musicians, but the conductor is, definitely, I. It goes without saying that the ensuing music is divine. Being the conductor it is for me to decide when a performance reaches a state of perfection and, judged by my exacting standards, this state is suitably far.

The prime numbers, at least those small enough to engage my eye, are wild. They move and chose and count, as far as I can see, at random. They are the only ones in my world I cannot guide. Even though unpredictable, neither thirteen nor seven tend to disturb the state of my present peace. The kind of surprises they hold are pregnant with luck, innocent of misfortune. They have changed nothing as yet, their essence is their promise, the promise that stays true to itself. The promise unrealised.

As the scroll of illuminated words unwinds, I find my hand holding a pen, writing and rewriting the ancient script. Decorating the letters, embroidering the lines, burnishing the gold leaf, new text is added to chapter and verse. Now that I am both reader and writer, suddenly it all makes sense. The writing does not only illuminate itself, it illuminates everything else as well. It records, in the clumsy shorthand of symbols and signs, all that my eye beholds, all that is captive in the dragonfly's

net. Although definitive, the text is neither exhaustive nor final. Its poetry rests permanently in the formative years, the last word is never spoken.

Still from the loftier height, still along the coloured, transparent lines of the silken web, I see myself move easily among the young trees, from one budding female to the next. One by one, I visit them all, fondling each breast, feeling the inside of each thigh. Eyes are lowered, lips open, the skin on the cheeks blushes into the lightest shade of pink. I withhold my choice to keep us in a state of arousal. We all anticipate a pleasure more profound than any pleasure ever had.

The power of my vision enables me, beyond merely observing, to transform the world. I can add, take away, multiply and divide all that is already there. I can mingle, mutate, marry, the most diverse of elements. And better still, I am permitted to bring forth amazing creations, original works, wonders beyond compare.

Thus, red deer, as playing pieces, run diagonally across the black squares of the chequered board. The ape, holding between his hairy legs a frisky cello, serenades the budding maids who have mostly dropped off the trees and are now riding on the backs of the enlarged turtles, their bare, enticing feet bathed in the clear waters of the rushing brook. The frogs, organised and led by the prime numbers into a well rehearsed choir around the unfurling scroll, are presently chanting what I have read and written, in a sublime, heavenly, voice.

And it all makes perfect sense. And it is all absolutely true.

And just to prove that what I see is not an illusion, unaided, I produce an impossible mirror. In it I see myself and, in the same instant, the whole world. A world devoid of me. My place is taken by a man, so far unfeatured, a man born utterly without fear.

Before descending, on the tenuous threads of the dragonfly's web, to make the acquaintance of this remarkable man, I take a last look around and survey where I am. It is then that I discover, on the distant horizon, the outer boundaries of the arboreal graveyard, the cemetery of the dying and the dead.

It is then that I comprehend, for the first time, that my life is an island in an unending sea of the departed, the unremembered, all that is gone without leaving a trace.

I avert my eyes from the distant horizon and climb down to earth to feel the verdant spring. I am relieved to touch the shoots, still pliant, still young, and smell the air, still sweet and fresh and bracing. All seems well in the woods, all alive and moving, nothing has changed, there is an abundance of time left for all things.

The only one missing, for the moment, is the man born utterly without fear. I search the grounds, the rivers, the web and its contents. To no avail. In my frustration, in my disappointment, I discover, instead, a yardstick in the midst of the trees.

The yardstick, once in my hand, points to the horizon. It insists to be taken, step by step, to measure exactly how far is the distant horizon from our timeless spring.

There is a no man's land from the beginning to the end, between eternal youth and the dying of the doomed. But to my consternation, this land is no more than a narrow strip of featureless landscape, inhabited by dull creatures unworthy of note. Almost without transition we, the yardstick and I, reach the waters that mark the edge of the cemetery. At its insistence, we record the meticulous measurements we have taken all along the slender margin that separates the living from the dead.

Retracing my steps, in the variable light of an oppressive silence, on the shifting edge of the cemetery, I read the imprints left in the caking mud by man, beast and things in between. Not much has changed in the intervening years, from the time of my first circular tours. The signs are still of life and death struggles, of victims, tired or distracted, oblivious to the treacherous waters, caught by surprise. I suspect each one of them believed himself to be immune, exempt, immortal.

For myself, living on the edge, I have become vigilant.

Light permitting, my eyes never leave the surface of the stagnant water. They detect the slightest ripple, the faintest movement of plant, insect, bird and beast. Whether it be innocuous or menacing in the extreme.

In the absence of light, my ears are trained to the ghostly silence. They are acute, they hear the sound of flapping wings before the wings flap, the sound of opening jaws before the jaws move.

I keep a record of the place and time of each and every incident. Nothing that I perceive, walking the shores of this deadly sea, is too trivial. With the help of the yardstick, I mark with particular care, again and again, the island's boundaries. Just to make sure the sea does not encroach, the dying does not come perilously near.

Once satisfied that the situation is stable, with the records and measurements in place, I am allowed to return to where it is spring.

It is an indescribable relief to swim with the turtles in the cool, lucid, unresisting brook. To keep up with the leaping deer as they rise in slow motion, unruffled, and clear the lower branches of the youthful, supple trees. To fly high on the tail of multicoloured mating birds whose nests are ready but still being built. To resume the game of chess with a friendly ape, in a position still too complicated, too rich in variations, to have a foreseeable end. To conduct a piece of divine music of enduring imperfection. To await with unjustified faith and confident excitement the good fortune that a thirteen is bound to bring. To add one more inspired line to the illuminating and illuminated manuscript, being certain it's not the last. To fall in love again and again, secure in the knowledge that my love is welcomed and is returned to me each time with an innocent pledge for all eternity.

I am free once more to climb unburdened the tenuous threads of the dragonfly's web, as flimsy and strong and transparent as ever. My world is one again, yet marvellously

many, each particle separate, unique, highly differentiated, each particle one and the same, endlessly, reassuringly, repeated.

Bringing time to a virtual standstill, I breathe easy. I see nothing age, nothing die, nothing decay.

Bliss. Confidence. Belief in the present. Belief unaware of itself. The feeling that anything and everything is possible. The arrogance to recreate a new world.

Then the folly of trying to give it reality with the aid of an impossible mirror. A mirror through which I can see, at one and the same time, myself and a world devoid of me. No vacancy being permitted, my place is taken by another man. The man born utterly without fear.

It is now the second time that I set eyes on him. From the loftiest height of the dragonfly's web, he appears clean cut, easy to grasp, well defined. But, on the ground, when I want to approach to shake his hand, the man is gone. All that is left, are his gigantic footprints set in stone, each stone at a fair distance from another.

So it takes me awhile to follow the trail, to see where it leads, if it leads anywhere and doesn't just peter out. Whatever the cost, I am impelled to seek him out. There are issues of mutual interest that can only be settled in a personal encounter, man to aspiring man.

With the help of the yardstick, I make my way, digressing here and there, from imprinted stone to imprinted stone, to the sea of the dead and the ones still dying. The giant footprints that lead me on, keep close to the edge and describe a full circle. The last one is the first, the first one, the last.

Lost in speculation, unsure how to proceed, I notice the boundary markings. In some areas, the waters are lapping the marks. There can be no doubt, the sea is encroaching on the land. The divide between the dead and the living has narrowed. Death is closing in.

I decide to conduct another survey. I measure and re-measure, taking even greater care. Keeping the old, I affix some additional markers to outline with accuracy the cemetery's further reaches.

In the course of my work, I can't help noticing some other subtle changes in the dismal landscape of my surrounds. For one thing, the smell of danger is more pronounced. It has much in common with a scent of blood. For another, there are now many flowers displaying a virulent, poisonous green colour that I do not remember seeing before. Then, the vegetation, hitherto exclusively water born, seems to have crept inland, rooting its tentacles into the watery mud. And the submerged creatures appear to have multiplied. There are more about, and they vary more in type.

In the fast changing, variable light nothing is certain, nothing appears in just one single guise. Still, I have a notion that the sea of the dead and the dying is on the move.

So I decide to stay awhile and study anew the scattered, muddy imprints of confused struggle, violence and terminal pain. The environment is diseased, the subject morbid, conclusions hard to come by. There is a chance, though, that in deciphering the clues, in reconstructing the horrors, I shall discover where my predecessors went so fatally wrong. What I should do, if anything can be done, to escape a similar fate.

From the very first, I saw victims caught by surprise. Unsuspecting, careless, half asleep, meandering on the edge of imminent events, they never imagined that it could happen. Or, at any rate, happen to them. Worse still, perhaps they could not bear to look, never realised they lived on the edge. Maybe never even saw the sea of suffering with its dead and dying.

Not me. No chance. I am vigilant. With eyes glued to the ground, through muddy impressions, I see the actual, the likely, the possible. Especially the possible.

Tentacles, of obscure flora and fauna, insinuating themselves round lazy limbs, adhering to the flesh, sucking blood out of arteries and veins. Even as frantic fingers try vainly to loosen the slippery grip, the weakened body is dragged screaming towards its watery grave.

Innocuous clouds of insects, none individually visible, hovering around the head of a nonchalant victim, accompanying his every carefree step. At a particularly auspicious moment, one of these lesser midgets, lays just one single minuscule egg inside the victim's inattentive ear. After a decent interval, with the man still dangerously ignorant, the egg hatches. Microscopic creatures, eager to explore their short span of life, spread, multiply and endlessly divide. They destroy a sophisticated, superior, network of nerves and tissues of brain. He begins to hear sounds inside his head, loses balance, totters on a while, goes blind, falls, crawls on all fours, falls again, and lies there paralysed, waiting, between despair and pain, for the cemetery to come and claim his pathetic remains.

From the desiccated branch of a dead tree, a giant bird takes off, circles high before swooping on her chosen victim who does not look up, does not look back, never takes the precaution to foresee his impending fate. Claws securely fastened to shoulders now bent, a cruel yellow beak at the ready, the bird proceeds at leisure to pick the flesh off the bones of the man running in terror of his life. He cannot turn to face his tormentor, he cannot defend himself. All he can do, for what is left of his days, is to wriggle feebly and enjoy the full range of horrors of feeling himself being slowly eaten alive.

All these endings, and many more, in hundreds of varieties, are derived from circumstantial evidence. I have met none of the victims, seen none of the struggles, did not actually witness the final episode of their lingering demise. But the muddy

imprints make the skeletal facts abundantly clear, leaving my rampant imagination to flesh in what is missing.

Creeping with excessive caution along the edge, yardstick at work, I keep an eye on the greedy vegetation. I keep a detailed watch on the whole insect world. I turn my head with regular frequency back and forth, up and down, to all the points of the compass. Just to make sure that nothing in the air, on the ground, or emerging from the water, nothing whatsoever, can possibly surprise me.

Even so, for the time being, the man born without fear escapes me. Although his stony imprints circle the edge, he, himself, is not a victim. So, still searching, I return, across a diminishing no man's land, to where I first saw him.

Once more I am permitted the joy of being. Once more I am allowed to be at the spring, at the birth, at the beginning of what is yet to come and never ceases to be. Once more I am carried by lightning insight to the loftier heights of the dragonfly's web, to comprehend a world in which I see no ageing, no death, no sign of decay.

Everything feels much as before. The same shades of green colour the trees. The waters of the brook are transparent and ever sweet. Mating calls are carried with careless abandon from wing to soaring wing. Whilst the octet plays yet another imperfect variation on a haunting theme, a few more moves advance the game of chess further from its distant, simplified, end. The piece of good fortune promised by a prime number is still in abeyance. The love of none of the waiting females has waned. The deer are serene. The turtles are free. The frogs are ecstatic.

Everything feels much as before, it is just that, from time to time, not very often, and only for a flashing instant, I catch myself remembering that I am on an island, an island precariously set in a sea of dying.

I let these brief shadows pass me by with a shudder, bravely or blindly refusing to dwell on a past and a future, a past and a future that do not strictly belong to the spring.

But when I return to the edge, I find the markers so hopefully placed to contain the sea, have all disappeared and fresh imprints on the ragged, muddy edge of the water, describe recent struggles along the shoreline, struggles more drawn out, more desperate, more involved.

From now the need to patrol the outer bounds of my island acquires greater urgency. More than ever, I believe that it was their own negligence that cost the lives of the victims. A fatal lapse of awareness that brought on their torment, their final misery.

I shall stay awake, I shall pay attention, I shall observe the slightest change. What happened to them will not happen to me.

When all is quiet on the circular front, when I detect no sign of movement on land, in the air or on sea, I return, more hesitantly now, to where it is always spring.

All is well, nothing much has aged and since there are no means to measure it, time stands, more or less, still. The predominant green is perhaps a shade or two darker, the brook, crystal clear, seems to run a little fast, but the turtles hold their formation just the same, the birds are still on their mating flight, the deer still serene. The game of chess, after a few more moves, remains unresolved. The ladies in waiting, a touch less patient, are kneeling in prayer to the self same saviour, whose arrival, much trumpeted, is fortunately always delayed.

The dragonfly, busy as ever, is weaving his brilliant web, a web still transparent, still holding miraculously together all the fragments of a disparate world.

All is well, but in the calm of my being, there is now the fragment of a doubt, insistently calling me to the dreaded shoreline of the unseen dying, and the bodies presumed dead, buried in the sea.

Thanks to my yardstick I know the sea is encroaching. Without a no man's land, the island is not quite the same. But there are still occasions when I find no fresh deviation on my circular tour, when the sea, and all within her, are dormant. When, I can still afford to steal back to the heart of my spring.

From the loftier heights of the dragonfly's web, I see it all, and all is well. There is not a single blemish, everything simply is and nothing yearns to become something else. I have all the time in the world to lavish on passing whims, with enough of it left to let me stay as I am.

I invent new games. Games of skill, of wit, of courage, of chance, games that pit me against myself and all the others on my island, where the present is unencumbered by past sadness, where there are no premonitions and what premonition there be, are free of future ills.

Yet the new games lack something of the original intensity. I am still absorbed, I still play to win, but every so often, I stop for a moment, I look up, my eyes wander into the distance, taking me back to the shoreline of an ever closing sea.

For the time being, the games are not over, they are faithfully awaiting my welcome return. The position is unaltered, nobody has cheated, no one has taken advantage of my enforced absence, my hasty resumption of abandoned play. My friendly opponents are patient, the setting is young, time is forbearing, it is still spring. The games hardly suffer, the principal victim of the untimely interruptions is... me.

For, even though time appears to stand still, and everything is still possible, I no longer feel at home residing herein. My stay, at any one time, is too brief, too flimsy, too near its own end. I am now no more than a guest in the heart of my spring.

It takes a succession of such disturbing intrusions, gathering frequency, power and pace, to dislodge the commanding presence of the dragonfly's web. But, eventually,

my hold on every thing within its reach slips far enough to leave me no longer the lord of my domain.

As I follow the sanguine deer through the never changing forest floor, I am painfully aware that they stayed here, true to themselves, all the times that I have been and gone.

The illuminated scroll, in its golden magnificence, is not yet complete. I keep coming back, to add to the unfinished text. But instead of full chapters, all I can manage now is the odd line or a word or two, at most.

For I am becoming ever more wary and increasingly suspicious. The sea is encroaching, the cemetery is on the move. I have to monitor its progress, to chart its changing boundaries. Even at the heart of my spring, with unmoving time and no sign of decay, I can no longer ignore the dead and the dying and the eroding shoreline coming my way.

So now I have become a commuter, a commuter between the living and the dead.

In the spring, at birth, I am constantly preparing my unseasonal, recurring journey to the suffering seaside. And I can only sustain my enforced stay on that edge, invigilating the horrific examination of dying, by swift, incessant flights back to the beginnings, where, self evidently, there can be no end.

As a commuter, my survival depends on an ability to forget. To forget in one place what is only relevant in the other. To forget amongst the dying, that time can stand still. To forget in the heart of spring that time is fast crumbling to an abysmal end.

It is not until my vigilance is at a fever pitch, until I begin to suspect everything around, until my commuting is so frequent that it has become a way of life, it is not until then, until it is too late, that I discover the irretrievable loss of my ability to forget.

So now, on the circular tours of inspection, doing my best to read the agonised convolutions most recently inscribed in the mud, I still see in the lost, hazy distance the glorious greens of a verdant spring. In the ominous, oppressive silence of that deadly shore, I still hear, ever so faintly, the enchanting song of the multicoloured mating birds. As I try to peer through the dark grey light across the dull, stagnant waters, expecting all the time a deadly onslaught, I still dream of winning the endless games in progress, still carry the hopes of the ladies-in-waiting. Waiting for me.

And when in the spring, in the promising land of eternal beginnings, where play is rest and rest is play, and all that is wonderful is yet to happen, I cannot help lifting my eyes to the near horizon, to the ends of my island, to where the terrors of the endgame are obscurely in view.

Even as I climb the thin, tenuous, transparent threads of the dragonfly's web, I have this dull, aching sensation, even here in the spring, of my time running out, of my life being over, of nothing and nobody waiting for me.

Such time that I am left, and my time is now moving apace, is mostly spent travelling. Travelling from the beginning to the end, and from the end back again to the beginning. When I reach inland, I am dragged back to the shore. Once on the shore, repelled by the sea of the dead and the dying, I seek refuge in the spring.

But in this restless, instant commuting, I can no longer keep my two worlds apart. Facing the cemetery of the dead and the dying, I find grotesque beauties of a disturbing, transplanted spring. And right at the source of life, in the calm of seamless creation, I discover the ravages of a kind of ageing that I myself carried there from the deadly reaches of a stagnant sea.

As I look at the pale grey, desiccated trunks standing limbless, half submerged in murky waters, I cannot help seeing behind them mighty trees in their magnificent, primeval prime. And as I follow the prolonged death throes of miserable beings, I stumble upon boys set ready for a lifetime of adventure, as they seek a glorious death in one thrilling moment. In witnessing the last struggle of these condemned men, I am forced to watch, simultaneously, earlier games they've won and lost, when winning was sweet and no loss was final.

Worse still, distinct shades of red and rust, of pale yellow and tarnished brown, are now competing with the predominant, exuberant green of the spring. On my trees each leaf, whilst freshly unfurled, has a twin that has turned and fallen to carpet the lifeless, dry bed of an ambivalent wood.

The red deer, head high, necks turned back, antlers proud, making stately progress, still sense no danger. But in the distance, I can now see a pride of carnivores squabbling over a carcass, the bloody remains of one of my stags.

The brook is still running through the wood, with the rebel turtle fleet still holding their own, but lower down, the stream appears to have petered out, and the stony banks are left covered in empty shells.

The game of chess is still delicately poised, the ape is still intent, it is still my move. But now a possible end is in sight. Two kings are alone on the board. Both the ape and I, adversaries of old, have retired.

Of humans, there are still no males, and the females are still agreeable and young. But through their velvetsoft skins, still without a stress mark, I cannot help seeing, in a hideous outline, a heap of flesh that has lost the shape to arouse any interest beyond a reproach to the follies of past desire.

The multicoloured birds, on their mating flight, still sing a song of love, but the ugly croaks of predatory fliers echoing in my ear raise nothing but shrill expectations.

On my severely curtailed visits, my eyes follow the dragonfly still weaving her transparent, dazzling web. But she no longer extends her flight to enrich my worldly

wealth. She is kept busy, flying merely to replace the threads that are broken, to repair a net torn to shreds, desperate to hold together a world fast falling apart.

The spring air is, as always, bracing the lungs. I cannot have enough of its refreshing, invigorating strength. But as I expand my chest to take in the innocent breeze, my nostrils are affronted by an ugly smell of decay.

There is nothing any more that I can touch, smell, hear or see, at its beginning, at its promising best, without the ghostly presence of its own repugnant end.

Thus, even as an irregular visitor, I cannot stay in the heart of the island that is no longer mine. Commuting to no purpose, I come merely to depart. Each visitation serves only to sharpen the pain of an eternal spring which, for me alone, is not going to last.

Commuting to no purpose, I return to the shore to accomplish nothing, and hurriedly surveying its horrors, leave almost at once. I still take careful measurements, of sea, of land, of the miserable edge. I still study the muddy imprints left by despairing men in their last hour. I still research the fine details of an unavailing struggle. I still do all that, I just no longer know why.

Not knowing why I am doing what I am doing makes what I am doing ever more essential. Not knowing why I am moving gives the moving an ever increasing, senseless urgency.

So, amidst haunting glimpses of a tormenting spring, I flail around a circle of terminal activities without a tangible end. In the variable light, I measure every degree in the rise of the foetid waters, each new distortion of imprints left behind by devastated men. In the oppressive silence, I record every variation in the strangulated cry of men, even as they die. In the lingering presence of corpses freshly entombed in a sea of suffering, I mime the painful story of each unfortunate demise to an audience reduced to just one: me, myself.

The measuring, having lost its original purpose, grows into monstrous proportions. The recording, having no use any longer, has become an intimate personal rite. Without anyone being the wiser, in a coded language of my own devising, at the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon, and at other, highly specified times in between, I note down in tones of increasing darkness, the final agonies.

The miming, devoid of meaning, has taken on an obsessive force. At random, for no apparent reason, I feel compelled to act out, in the finest of detail, the measured and recorded death throes of the victims that line this terrible shore. I display the early symptoms, the creeping disabilities, the crippling effects of a foredoomed struggle, I suffer the recurrent pain of slow defeats and live the terror of one hundred imminent deaths. Deaths inherited from others, therefore more precious than my own.

And all the time the pace gathers and desperation feeds upon itself in a vicious circular move. I measure, I record, I mime. I measure time. I record ominous signs. I mime cruel variations of the selfsame, dismal end. I do nothing else. I mime, and record, and measure, and I do not know why.

And because I no longer know why, the measurements are meticulous, the recordings elaborate, the mimes repetitive, fanciful and frenzied, all at the same time.

And because I no longer know why, this compulsive performance has become the whole of my life. Commuting between a living spring, which is now merely a painful reminder, and the place of terminal encounters, finding respite nowhere, I have lost my freedom, my will, my reason.

Travelling the edge, the edge of the cemetery of the dead and the dying, I must measure, I must record, I must mime, I must rehearse, and keep rehearsing so that in the end, if and when my time comes, I shall not die of fright.

Such a life, stretched between extremes of pain, precariously poised on a dangerous edge, driven by a categorical imperative to act, and act consistently against all sense, such a life as that, is hard to bear. Mercifully, the condition worsens, the agony is becoming infinitely more acute.

The approaching catastrophe comes ever closer. The need to move ever more urgent. Yet the measurements are getting increasingly refined, the recordings more elaborate, the mimes more exacting. Frantically I move from tomb to tomb to perform each rite. In the hurried rehearsals of aberrant terrors I cannot act otherwise. To ward off the inevitable, there is no room for compromise.

But no matter how fast I move, how deftly I perform, I cannot cope. There is no more time. The tension is now unbearable. Breaking point. The end has come. At last.

Two voices, dressed in white, quite close by, are heard by me or someone who bears an ambiguous relationship to someone who I once knew as myself.

“Unpredictable” a clinical voice. Cold, clipped, precise.

“It looks so bad... it seems hopeless” the solicitous voice of someone who cares.

“It could go either way. The innate powers of recovery when all appears lost, are inestimable. It really all rests with him.”

“I always knew it was a mistake to let him try. Nobody could tell the outcome... and the chances of him getting through...”

“But that is what makes it so interesting. We all have to await the crisis, when there is a complete breakdown, and he stands naked and defenceless in the eye of the terror, for the truth to be revealed.”

“And the risk, the risk of it all ending in a shivering wreck of endless nightmares, with a saliva dripping mouth screaming incoherently into an empty, frozen space... what about the risk of that?”

“The taking of that risk is exactly what makes a transformation possible. Without taking the chance of going over the edge, the other side will always remain a forbidding presence. A presence that makes significant change impossible.”

“And it’s not you, is it, who will be there to look after the deformed... helpless... drooling creature abandoned, in nobody’s care?”

“His time of being looked after is over. If he pulls through, he will need no one. If not, he is past help.”

“Is there nothing... nothing at all anyone can do to save him from himself?”

“No. It all depends on his own hidden reserves. On what he doesn’t know he has. On what happened a very long time ago.”

Hearing these voices gives me the impression that I am still alive. Being disembodied, and dressed in white, these same voices make me question of which world I am now a part.

I am no longer on the edge. I cannot see the cemetery of the dying and the dead. The eternal spring, even as a distant, fleeting glimpse, has also disappeared from view.

But right in front of me, legs astride, face inscrutable, larger than life, stands the man born utterly without fear.

CHAPTER XXIII

MEMORIES REMEMBERED

Between the legs of the giant born without fear, we, the boy and I, go hand in hand into the past.

Having passed under the archway formed by those legendary limbs, we find ourselves walking the streets of no ordinary town. Its outer walls are mediaeval battlements, the roads are of cobbled stone, there are no cars. Instead, carts, carriages and hansom cabs ply their trade, driven by morose coachmen who crack whips, grumble and, unprovoked, swear softly under their breath. Men cover their head with wide brimmed hats of felt, women wear fur collars loosely attached to prominently buttoned coats and all shops have substantial counters across which devoted staff gossip, converse and serve.

There are a good number of primary and secondary schools, each exclusive to a denomination, a gender or a race. There is a university, an opera and a strong language divide. It's a provincial centre of government but also a capital, the capital of no recognised state.

The street signs, shop fronts and public notices are relatively fresh, an indication that the town has recently changed hands. Damage to the fabric of some buildings, fortifications reduced to ruins, abandoned mansions, suspicious eyes and a suppressed hostility dancing naked on people's faces, are uncomfortable reminders all of earlier strife, more distant wars.

On the outskirts, scattered smallholdings of barking dogs, flapping hens and scuffling pigs separate neatly furrowed fields from orchards of gnarled apple trees. Beyond, wooded hills and hilly pastures. Beyond them mountain forests rife, in the absence of man, with boar and bear and witch and a wonderful variety of deeply rooted fears.

Town and country are distinct. Set against each other, in close proximity, they create contrasts, tensions, excitements, of a kind that matters for a child in his formative years.

The peasantry come into town bearing fresh, unpasteurised milk, butter and cream. Once there, still coarse grained, they translate themselves into nannies,

cooks, soldiers, grooms and servants of all sorts. Even so, they retain on their person a composite aroma of hay, sweat and manure, which, on Sundays, is overlaid with a perfume whose only describable attribute is, that it's cheap.

The burghers, sheltered in refined apartments by fancy brocade curtain and polished parquet floor, try to keep their distance. They read books, they take daily baths, they hide the foul smell of their own production in discreet cubicles. They censor language, excising certain terms of a base connotation related to our animal ancestry.

Nevertheless, between the suspect neighbours there is much intercourse. And not just buying and selling, serving and being served. There is the intertwining of bodies, the mingling of blood. More insidiously, the invaders smuggle into town the crude, archetypal remnants of a savage history, a history well documented but implicitly denied by custom, law and prevailing authority. At the same time, nurtured in harsher climes, being backward, they are prey to the corrupting inducements of a sophisticated ease, which they see, covet and seldom enjoy.

Such are the streets we are walking. I know all about them, the boy does not. He feels the resultant tensions, he is subject to the local strains, he is formed but uninformed by the ambivalent nature of the place.

A public park. No surrounding fence. Broad, informal avenues of huge forest trees, survivors of encroaching men. Cast iron benches with curved wooden seats, inhabited by purposeless old men and young minders of prams rich in promise, uncertain of end.

In a clearing, within the confines of an ill defined pitch, a game is in full flow. The boy, ball at his feet, a little younger than the others, is fast, agile, intensely absorbed. He cannot see the enemy, lurking behind a tree delegated to act as one of the goalposts. Evading a tackle he looks up, decides to take a shot. It's accurate, it's fast, it eludes the diving keeper, it's a goal!

In the same instant, the park keeper leaps out from behind the designated goalpost. With a triumphant yell he grabs the ball. The players watch in a shocked silence the uniformed figure, confiscated trophy firmly in the crook of his elbow, limp slyly away.

On the spur of the moment, moving swiftly, the boy steals in behind the departing figure. A well aimed punch knocks the ball out of the gripping arms of its captor and as it bounces forward, in one fluent movement, it is swooped up by the quick-witted boy. The limp, a vestige of the great war, prevents the keeper from giving chase. He is reduced to waving threatening arms and uttering impotent imprecations to a group of taunting youngsters who laugh openly in his face.

I leave the boy in the clearing, in the admiring limelight of newly found friends. And find him again, shortly thereafter, close by, roaming the skeletal frame of an unfinished building, still with his ball, still with his friends.

The construction works are at their most exciting. There are no walls, no railings, no stairs. The only way to get from place to place is by swinging on ropes, climbing scaffolding poles, jumping planks set at a dangerous, inviting distance. Somewhere, at the height of a second floor in the making, during a short pause in the action, a casual conference is being held. The idea under consideration is the feasibility of a jump from that height right down onto a pile of sand at ground level.

Opinion on the subject is divided. One view is that the sand is likely to absorb the body's impact, enabling the landing to be soft. Another is that such an attempt would be a foolhardy showing off, bordering on madness. Heated challenges fly about. Some of the youngsters go to the very edge, look down, and amidst embarrassed hilarity, turn back, making a show of pretending they never meant to jump.

Unexpectedly, the boy, younger and lighter than the rest, takes off. He jumps through a barrier of fear and, to his own surprise, lands safely on the sand. The others follow, shamefaced, one by one.

Without warning, the whole gang breaks into a run, turns a corner and disappears. I meet the boy next at his school. Head bent down, he is secretly copying into his notebook someone else's work. Work that is for the next class, work meant to have been done at home, the previous, wonderfully wasted, afternoon. From time to time he looks up to keep vaguely in touch with the changing chalk marks on the board that accompany the master's rambling voice. On impulse, a well timed, witty remark leaves his lips in a loud enough whisper to drown the whole class in waves of rippling laughter.

Before the laughter has had time to die away, the master stands over the boy, hauls him upright by his ear and with a resounding blow, slaps him hard across the face. The red, misshapen face, incredulous, twitches in pain. Brightly coloured stars collide in misted over eyes, then give way to an overabundance of tears flowing shamefully to ward off further punishment and pain.

After the bell, the same bell that paradoxically both summons and liberates the population of the school, we find ourselves in the corner of a crowded playground. From the careful folds of an opaque greaseproof paper, the boy unveils a goose liver sandwich to an envious gallery of hungry onlookers. Prepared by his mother, the two chunky pieces of a fresh, home baked loaf hold between them rich layers of yellow goose fat and slices of pink-grey liver, interlaced with strips of green pepper and just the right amount of salt. Standing on a snow covered ground, in an icy wind, with cheeks still tender, it's smell and taste obliterate the immediate past and put the future into an altogether more favourable light.

Going home, at that time of the afternoon, when tides of pupils wearing a different uniform are sure to flood the streets, the boy has to be vigilant. For a stretch, he is

shielded within the formation of a loosely knit platoon going his way. Later, past a significant set of crossroads, individual destinations diverge. From here he is forced to strike for home on his own.

The boy hastens his steps, then breaks into a trot. But some of the hostile waves are still ahead, there is no way around. A wave obligingly opens in the middle, inviting him to go through. As he does, a boot lunges out. He stumbles, falls to the ground, gets up. A glancing blow to the head removes his cap. When he bends down to retrieve it from the sloppy snow, a kick from the back sends him sprawling. The cap, with its badge denoting an obstinate, proud, well hated race, is now an object of mockery, passed from boot to boot, dribbled and kicked up in the air. I leave the boy standing there alone with tears of impotence trickling down his cheeks, grateful that it's the cap that is taking the brunt of the beating, not his own precious head.

At home, the table is set for lunch. White linen tablecloth, napkins in silver rings, father sombre, at the head, mother, agitated, dishing out soup from a porcelain tureen. Eating serves a double purpose, to nourish and to restrict the scope of troubled speech. Silence is in everyone's best interest. Mother's, so as not to provoke the divulging of bad news. Father's, so as to maintain a lifetime's balance of actions over words. The boy's, so that he would be spared having to invent lies in answer to the perennial question: "And how did you get on at school today?"

Punctually at one o'clock, the wireless is switched on to deliver, from a walnut veneered shell, on clandestine frequencies, its quotidian report from the far flung fronts of the second world war.

Irrespective of the current state of war, the father lies down on a day-bed for his measured, sacred sleep. During its prescribed course the house is as quiet as the grave. Before his mother has a chance to obstruct his move, I see the boy slip out of doors, slide down stairs five at a time, to join the gathering gang for the scheduled and unscheduled entertainment of a busy summer afternoon.

He is on his bike, performing minor feats of skill and daring in a continuous, never ending, informal competition against others in a shifting, unstable hierarchy. Balancing on the pedals at virtual standstill, riding a sinuous course with hands off handlebars, standing on the saddle, jumping over ditches, riding in forbidden zones, through narrow, crowded pedestrian pavements, plunging down ceremonial steps of public monuments, each trick rehearsed relentlessly, every feat judged, scored and recorded in the hard earned esteem of the self same, minute regiment of cavalry.

On foot, pocket knife unsheathed, the boy, still the youngest of the group, is combing the trees in search of a branch, of the right size and shape, to make a catapult. Debarked and twice circumcised, it is supple, strong and ready to accommodate rubber, lace and a leather pouch, tailored to purpose from discarded shoes. A varied

selection of stones fills the pockets, much needed ammunition to test and calibrate weapons hand crafted, as yet untried. Bottles, cans, the bulbs of street lights and windows of individuals chosen with malicious care, serve as useful targets before the pre-arranged battle is allowed to commence.

Missile range sets the approximate location of the two camps. Ditch, shrub, fence and the bodies of other warriors, firing at random, provide shelter and mutual encouragement. In the general excitement, intent as everyone is on stepping out, taking aim and ducking back again, nobody notices one particular stone. A smallish, well rounded stone that comes flying straight and silent through the air to strike the forehead of the boy just above the line from where his hair will, later on, begin to recede.

The cut is not visible at first. It takes time for the blood to form a small underskin lake, before it trickles down the face. The boy, still holding the catapult, wipes his face with his free hand. The hand, thinly covered in a smudge of red, is a surprise to him. Unable to see the wound, the boy seeks its reflection in the eyes of friends. Friends now standing mute in a respectful semicircle round a novel point of interest. Their communal face displays a youthful look of undifferentiated curiosity, anxiety and awe.

The boy, impressed, is running home. Into the arms of his mother to be engulfed in fear. Off to the hospital, to confront the pain of a needle waiting to thread stitches on the margins of an open wound. The sharp sting of dark purple liquid iodine. The disinfectant smell of white, clean, medical rooms. Back home to a father's perfunctory chiding, delivered with undisguised pride shining in two admiring, warrior, eyes.

On a mid-summer Sunday, a year further back, light fading, in a crowded street set aside for soldiers and servant girls, I find the boy leading a charge. The charge is against a heaving multitude of fulsome breasts and prominent buttocks provocatively set. Coarse textured, ill fitting, monochrome uniforms hold intercourse with brightly coloured, hand embroidered, made to measure dresses, setting and savouring future dates. Arms linked, they form swaying clusters of two, three, four, or more. Man and woman face each other in a mating dance of a common, traditional, sort.

As far as the gang is concerned, none of whose members is yet a man, the idea is to run, in a loose formation, through the street, touching, fondling, pressing or pinching as many targets as can be had. Scoring and failing to score is individually based. It's every boy for himself. If one has the misfortune to be caught he is sure to be thrashed. No one can expect the others to come to his help.

Slighter, more agile than his mates, the boy, heart in mouth, is well ahead. He weaves and ducks and brushes hard against each available soft, bulging protuberance with the speed of the terrified. There is not much sensation between hand and flesh but it doesn't matter, it's the number of hits that counts.

At the reunion, a safe distance away, the survivors, having caught their breath, give competing accounts of recent accomplishments. There are tales of squeezed nipples, of underskirts lifted, of damp forests of pubic hair, of hot pursuits, of perilous escapes from the steely grip of soldier arms. And many other deeds in a similar vein. Tales the boys, jointly and severally, conspire to enjoy.

Out of nowhere, out of nothing, one of youngsters turns abruptly on the boy. Scarcely bigger, he challenges the boy's good faith, accusing him of doubting the veracity of his own outrageous tale. The boy spoke not a single word, but that is immaterial. The scene is set, two would be males are trapped in a circle of demanding friends. It's the tribal will for a fight to be had.

But there is no fight. At least not a fight worthy of it's name. After a half hearted, token resistance, the boy is wrestled to the ground. Arm twisted behind the back, face pressed into the ground, he has to admit in so many words the truth of a lie that is barefaced. Mud on the lips, he has to repeat events unlive, boasts far removed from any possible facts. I leave the boy in floods of tears, tears of frustration, tears of pain. A vicious knee is bearing down on his submissive neck. I cannot bear his shame. I cannot watch the end.

Some time earlier we meet in the cellar of a house inhabited by the boy, his family and attendant domestic help. Buried underground, with a mean cast iron grill, set above, the only source of light, the cellar is a place of dark shadows. Shadows that hold secrets, revelations never to come, terrors as yet unformed, intangible, unnamed. They also hold the logs, piled high, needed to feed the fires that are kept burning upstairs all winter long. Logs fetched by the maid on her strong back, in basketfuls of heavy loads, once, or twice, a day.

Just now, at the furthest end of the dim, cavernous hall, the maid is not carrying any logs. She is lying on top of them, on her back, and between her wide stretched legs, humping wildly up and down, is the awkward figure of a man in a dishevelled uniform.

From where we are, the boy and I, all we can see is a naked thigh. The white of the untanned flesh, moved in short, violent, jerks against a background of obscure, stationary greys. But there are no acoustic impediments. No barriers to a free flow of the profane language of self fulfilling lust. Nothing to stand between the growls, the grunts, the unrepentant sighs, the mournful wails, the rising and falling ebb of banshee screams and the boy's attentive ears. Nothing to damp the resonance of slaps inflicted with repetitive urgency by the horny palm on undulating female flesh.

We retire from the cellar, unnoticed, in disarray. Even though close to the boy, I cannot read his eyes. He looks away, somewhere far into a future, and what he sees there, he is not willing to share.

But alone with the maid, family safely out of sight, I note a change of roles. His hands, previously surreptitious, are now roaming impudently all over prohibited zones. And yet, when her door is left ajar, when their little games have reached a critical stage, with an open invitation on his virgin plate, the red faced boy, devoid of excuses, beats an ungainly, humiliating retreat.

I lose sight of the boy. When I meet him again, on his way back from another school, he appears younger by a good many years. A thick overcoat, mittens, mufflers over the ears, woollen cap and socks, help to keep out the cold which is bitter even with the sun out in mid afternoon. The streets are covered in hard packed snow, the cabs have sleds on, having lost their wheels. In places, the wildly oscillating temperatures have laid down smooth icy patches, for the benefit of youngsters, to run up, slide and savour each other's spectacular falls.

Passing the market stalls, the boy, despite his mother's edict, cannot resist an overpowering smell. Coarse, thick sausages, are sizzling in a pool of boiling fat. The podgy fingers of a massive peasant woman hand over the succulent morsel on a generous slice of fresh baked bread. The taste, at that time and place, in that degree of cold, for the boy, in the first voracious bite, is something likely to last for the rest of his life.

No longer drawn towards dishes kept warm especially for him, waiting impatiently at home, the boy, in bad kept company, drifts further and further out his customary way. He is in search of the ideal patch of ice, the one that provides a never ending slide, on which to glide, smooth, effortless and fast, to all eternity.

This kind of search has a tendency to prolong itself. Each slide is unique to itself. They vary in length, in quality of surface, in run up, in level of incline, in width, in the relative absence of trees, lamp posts, billboards, inattentive pedestrians, imperious coachmen and other such moving obstacles that have no regard to the importance of what is being achieved. Each slide has to be tried out several times, to ensure the right angle and speed of approach. Then there are races, boys sliding side by side. And battles, boys colliding in the middle, having launched themselves into the slide from opposite sides.

All this takes time. Of which time the boy is intermittently aware. As the sun disappears behind the dome of the Opera House, the darkening gloom brings to an early end the short winter afternoon. Lights are filling windows, leaving fewer and fewer of them blind. The boy, frozen in his move, throws anxious glances in the vague direction of his home, where his absence must be, by now, acutely felt.

A friend, the only other player still left in play, invites him home, close by. A hesitation, then acceptance. It's obviously far too late to turn back. Besides there is an offer of being handed the controls of a brand new railway set.

Lying on a carpet of grand design, master of a train rushing through movable tunnels on a circular track, having absorbed two cups of hot chocolate and an assortment of cakes to boot, the boy has a desperate need to postpone the reckoning. Despite proddings from the parent hosts, using outright lies and minor distortions of the truth, he is able to keep delaying departure home.

With the evening meal on the table, uninvited, with much foreboding, at long last, the boy takes his reluctant leave. Throwing caution to the winds, he summons a cab and sinks deep into its comforting, voluminous seat.

Sitting alongside, travelling in near silence, catching brief glimpses of the boy's quiet face in the light of passing street lamps, I find it hard to read his thoughts. Is he going over past incidents of being lost and found, casually injecting grief, merciful relief and anger into a mother who deserved a tamer child. Is he seeing a search party combing the park, his name reverberating the banks of the river, the shores of the lake? Is he listening to frantic telephone calls made on his behalf to likely parents of unlikely friends? Or is he trying to cobble together a raft of excuses into a vaguely credible tale?

I have no way of knowing. Perhaps he has given up on the imminent future and is daydreaming in a more distant tense.

The hansom cab is left standing in the road as we mount three flights of stairs. The horse, skin draped in a shining film of sweat, is letting off steam through nostrils that quiver in the icy air. The coachman, wrapped in fur, perched high on his seat, is waiting immobile to be paid off. The boy, two paces ahead of me, having pressed the bell, is facing an ominous front door.

Sounds of urgent steps. The face of a good looking woman in her mid thirties temporarily disfigured by a tumult of conflicting emotions. The boy is grabbed by arms reaching out with a violence that threatens to hug, hold and suffocate, all at the same time. The door slams shut. Behind it a torrent of shrieks, screaming question marks, sobbing words, despairing silences, and other such useless, marginal notes form an imperfect commentary on a behaviour that defies adult understanding.

By the time the door opens again to let out the maid, the boy and his mother are no longer in the hall. I watch her place some coins in the coachman's outstretched hand and follow the cab as it glides away, empty, into the dimness of a long forgotten past.

We meet again at the funeral of the boy's grandfather. The coffin is carried on the shoulders of four pall bearers, chief among them the second eldest of the dead man's surviving sons. He is, also, the father of the lad.

The occasion is sombre. There is quite a crowd, the deceased was much loved and respected in the community. The participants all wear one or other version of the appropriate burial mask. The boy is impressed. Particularly by the sight of his

father's grief whose tears have dissolved for a moment the sharp features of a hitherto taciturn, unchanging face.

The boy is impressed, but, from what I can see, he is not moved. I suspect he stands in awe at a ritual which commands feelings, feelings he simply does not have. As the coffin is lowered into a deep, narrow rectangular hole from which there can be no escape, as he is awaiting his turn to throw a clod of soil over the plain wooden lid, he seems to be searching within himself for some pain. He finds nothing, then circulates, self conscious, in a maze of relations, orthodox mourners, and a lot of aged, ailing strangers, ever eager to pay their respects to the dead.

When I come across him again, the boy is very young, a first year pupil in an exemplary elementary school on the other side of the great language divide. The school is the showcase of a teacher's training college, in whose grounds and by whose staff, the pupils are taught to read and write. The boy carries the handicap of having embarked on his academic career a year early, without understanding a single word employed in the class. As an added burden, he seems to have been adopted as the pet of the college students, who are all female, pretty and young.

Just now the boy is in disgrace. I do not know the exact nature of his misdemeanour. It may be no more than an incorrigible tendency to daydream. As punishment, he is making the rounds of the school, having to stand in front of each form, reciting a demeaning account of his alleged misdeeds. Beatings are out, public humiliation is in.

I follow him as he knocks on each door, as he asks the teacher for permission to perform. He has to face, through misted eyes, mates who seem united in the open enjoyment of his utter misery. His voice falters, fragments, is finally reduced to a succession of shameful, hurried whispers. The poor boy takes to heart what for me would be no more than a slight embarrassment.

Round about the same time, I am accompanying the boy on a family outing which may have a bearing on what is left of the formative years of his life. We are to inspect the apartment which is likely to be their new home! The old one, which furnished thus far his childhood years, is too confined now that his mother is heavily pregnant, and, besides there are other, more profound, reasons for the move.

Togged out in his sailor suit, hair brushed, in all appearance clean, well kempt, the boy is marching smartly beside his parents to the designated house of much ambition and uncensored hope. The building is overshadowed by the huge horse chestnut trees, now in full summer leaf, of the adjacent municipal park, where, almost unnoticed, a group of ragged children at play are observing keenly the world passing by.

Bored with adult juxtaposition of absent household objects in an unfurnished flat, the boy is let loose to explore his future surroundings and breathe some healthy fresh air.

Quicksilver in his movements, as always, the boy is out of sight. It takes me a while to find him again. By then, as I can make out standing afar, he has been captured by the ragged army, now no longer aimless, no longer at play. They hold him, they pelt him, they smear him with dung left behind horses on the road dividing the estate from the park. As I come closer, the army is fast dispersing, but I am still in time to hear the confusing multitude of their vicious taunts.

When the parents, on their way home, collect their child, in so shocking a state, the scene is deserted. Other than I and the boy, no witnesses to the cruel events are to be had. The interrogation, as to who and why, of a tearful, incoherent, wounded child, yields no meaningful results. But we both know it was all about being posh, having a well fucked, big bellied mum, and something else, even more disturbing, besides.

For the space of two years we are quite apart. When we meet again the boy is a four year old child, playing with his bucket and spade on the sandy beach of a sea named black. Beside him the figure of an overseeing maid, fresh plucked from the country, young, inexperienced, brought up strictly on a diet of harsh realities and old wives' tales. They have been sent outside by a mother who wants to unpack in peace. Inside the chalet, a stone's throw from the beach, half empty suitcases, drawers pulled open, books, toys, useful utensils littering the floor, and an angelic toddler, the younger brother of the boy. The family, less a father inevitably delayed in town, in keeping with the custom of the time, is on its long summer holidays.

In the absence of any breeze, general somnolence prevails under the canopy of an unrelenting, hazy heat. A fine meshed metal net protects the window against insects whose buzzing flight, night and day, pervades the air.

Later, the two brothers are lying feverish in their beds. A man of swarthy complexion is holding a syringe in his hairy hand. He is about to inject the little boys with a substance of dubious origin, dangerous effect.

Later still, in a place of thick, white washed walls, probably a hospital of some sort, I am right beside the boy, who is kneeling up in his cot. The next one to his, is empty. His mother, near collapsed, is leaning against the wall. The palms of her hands are pressing hard against eyes that cannot bear to see.

At this precise moment I am abruptly called away. Still I try, as best I can, to keep in touch with the historic events as they unfold. I have it on good authority that the dying boy, accompanied by both parents, on the lap of the family physician, was transported by the Orient Express to the town of his birth. There, in a desperate measure, a maverick consultant professor compressed the poor fevered body in layers of ice. As his life lay in the balance, hovering this way and that, his grandfather went to consult a man close to God somewhere in the high and distant mountains, and came back, all serene, with the good news that all would end well.

Standing at the bedside, as the boy sits enthroned on a pile of pillows, surrounded by kindred courtiers and a coterie of exalted relations, with the homage of expensive gifts amassed on the floor, I have the uneasy sense of being a participant to a rebirth, a miracle, a second coming, a marvellous expectation that is going to be impossible to fulfil.

That is the one and only time I see the boy on the occasion of his remarkable recovery, but I hear, admittedly through a less reliable source, that shortly thereafter some unfortunate complications set in.

Apparently, on seeing his mother, for no obvious reason, frequently break into uncontrollable sobs, he began to inquire after the child whose absence seemed more and more suspiciously long. At first he was told that his little brother was deeply asleep. Then, that he was ecstatically happy in some unbelievable playground, playing unending games. And finally, that he wouldn't return, but not to worry, the stork would bring a replacement, a baby child equally as good.

What with his illness, convalescence and a new kind of silence that entered the home, the right time never came to tell him the truth. The trouble was that, meanwhile, the boy became a little confused. Confused about the approximate duration of sleep, confused about fantastic playgrounds never to be seen, confused as to whether a replacement for him also would appear soon.

We meet again the year before the fateful year. Sitting on the divan, the boy is driving a bus at a furious pace. He has but one passenger, his little friend next door, a boy of the same age. The engine roars, the road is full of curves, the hooter hoots to sweep mere pedestrians out the way.

The little friend needs to wee, he wants to get off. But the next stop is at some distance yet, there can be no question of a halt. The request is repeated several times, at shorter and shorter intervals, but the answer remains steadfastly the same as the bus accelerates tooting all the way. The passenger is reduced to tears. His cries bring the boy's mother into the room. She manages to persuade the driver to slow down and let his little friend get off to wee.

The same summer, three of us are out on a hike. In a single file, the boy, his father ahead of him, and I, modestly bringing up the rear. Father and son are equipped with virtually identical gear: short leather trousers, braces, open necked shirts with rolled up sleeves, rucksacks of olive green canvas, hand carved walking sticks. Only the size varies, and that makes all the difference.

The hilly path winds through dense woodland, not that far the from the town. Still, a fair distance to travel on the short legs of such a little man. Yet, for both of them, it is imperative that he keeps up. Keeps up all the way.

His father turns around and asks the boy if he saw something of interest lying on the ground. A shake of the head. He is led back a few paces on the path and is urged

to look again, to look with greater care. Head bent down, eyes wide open, the boy searches obediently, at first with no result. Then letting his boots rummage among the fallen leaves, amazingly, there it is. A big, shining, silver coin on the path.

Walking behind them, I have seen no coin drop from any tricky fingers. So I am left to conjecture whether the opportunity presented itself or was cunningly manufactured to forge yet another precious link in the heavy chain that binds two generations to the same old iron yoke.

From here onwards, as we reach the even more obscure areas of my quest, we tend to drift apart, the boy and I. The fault lies with me, or with him, or with both us. Or, maybe, just with the nature of reality. At any rate, making every effort to stay close, all I get are isolated snapshots, faded fragments, elusive impressions of what makes the boy the man he'll be.

I see him perched on top of the walnut veneered wardrobe about to take flight. I see him land in his father's proud, waiting arms, only to be hurled high into the air again and again, a performance closely watched by a disapproving mother's anxious eyes.

I watch him pull the tablecloth and bring the best china crashing down. I am with him when he strikes a hammer on the swollen, bandaged foot of an uncle dozing on the divan. When he darts out of his granny's despairing reach to smash the glass door of a vitrine which holds curious Italian knick-knacks on display. When he chucks a fine desk top clock out of a window for no better reason than the astonishment of innocent passers by. And all this to the accompaniment of a father's indulgent smile and a mother's ambiguous, ineffective, oft repeated, "no".

I see him push away in anger helping hands as he is trying to climb a chair. And submit in tearful frustration to the very same hands, as they undo the bone buttons of his lederhosen because he cannot as yet wee entirely by himself.

I see the frightened little face as he is being chased by a pig on a neighbouring smallholder's patch. And, safe in a circle of family and friends, I hear his half sheepish, half boastful voice say: "Did you see how I made the pig run and run and run?"

I peer under a table, at an adult meal, where, crawling on all fours, a ferocious dog, he is biting the trouser legs of a guest he has never met before. And I catch sight of the shiver of fear in his eyes as the guest's face appears beneath the tablecloth, in a sudden, violent growl.

Through a door left slightly open I glimpse into the child's room, where the maid is busy ironing while he, standing in a cot, and his mother, in full evening regalia, are caught in a clinging, prolonged embrace. An embrace brutally broken by a demanding voice from outside the room, the stentorian voice of one who has, on her, a prior claim.

For years I continue to wander in that anything but ordinary town, in search of what I have lost. I keep returning to the same inner courtyard where he first improperly

kissed a girl. The frozen lake he skated over on so many evenings, lit by searchlights and the music of Strauss, Lehar and Liszt. The arch of triumph through which he scored his ten thousand goals. The bench in the classroom with his carved initials worn smooth by mindless hours of numbing boredom, as he struggled to imbibe arbitrary information dished out in liberal proportions with puritanical zest. The red painted bed of his dreams and nightmares, lullabies and happy ending stories his patient mother read aloud, with exact, ritual repetition, nightly, on endless, selfish request. His father's store on the main square, a favourite attraction, with its pendant chandeliers, gramophones, radios, plugs, wires, sockets and every existing device to electrify the people and illuminate the place. The domed hall of worship where his parents made their fated marriage vows. The centuries old wooden gates of the house where he was born. The garret windows of the studio on the steepest hill in town where his parents shared their first naked dawn and where, alongside many an ambitious plan, his fate was first pronounced.

I keep returning to all these places in search of the same youngster, the same boy, the same child, to take me by the hand and lead me to see, feel, grasp all that was here before.

But I keep returning in vain. The youngster, boy, child, are all gone. So is the mother, the father, their labour, their smile, their tears, their painstaking achievement, their life, their hope.

I am left standing alone, disconsolate in the main square of that town which is a capital of no recognised state.

Being almost within reach of a tangible world, so rich in memorable incident, so full of passion, pleasure and pain, disaster and triumph on every conceivable scale, built in the minute detail of lives I have shared, I cannot resign myself to carrying with me, for the rest of my life, merely such meagre fragments, such faded images of their once powerful sway.

CHAPTER XXIV

MEMORIES RETRIEVED

Sitting on a public bench, letting my eyes rest on the ornate cast iron railing that outline a most famous square, I feel the presence of the past so acutely present that I believe, against all evidence, there must be a way back. Otherwise such a loss would simply be too great to bear.

Occupying the same piece of furniture, ubiquitous in an empire now extinct, an old man I didn't notice before, is poised in quiet repose. He must have settled next to me while my attention wandered off. His expensive outfit, fashionable before the war, is now showing distressing signs of continuous wear. From a narrow, sunken face, which comes to a point in a sparse goatee, two dark, penetrating eyes scan the world, their power undimmed by difficult, eventful years. After a period of friendly silence, the talking begins.

"The pigeons are getting lazier, just like the people... have you noticed how they ignore the crusts wedged behind the railings, hard to get at... they don't fly to hand for crumbs as they used to... but that's because they are much more suspicious, as, mind, is everyone else in town... but you wouldn't know, would you, being a stranger..."

"I am not exactly a stranger, I was born here, you know."

"Maybe. It doesn't signify. You have been away for so long... so much has happened, so much has changed... it is better for you to be a stranger, for all that it counts..."

"It may be better, but that's not how I feel... I do not feel a stranger, on the contrary..."

"No... no, don't tell me you've come home, please do not say that after a lifetime of exile, breathing this foul domestic air, you feel comfortable once more..."

"No, nothing like that. I haven't come back to live here, I am not that mad. I am perfectly well aware that this cannot be my home... it's that I cannot leave just yet... something holds me here... doesn't want to let go..."

"Aha... aha... I know the feeling well. Some things are bothering you... things that go a long way back... things that happened here, in town... things you think you'd like to know more about... well, let me tell you, it's not a such good idea to go rooting about a place where certain questionable things are supposed to have been laid to rest, where what was not acceptable has enjoyed undisturbed decades of dying an indecent death..."

"It may or may not be a good idea for all I care... I don't think I have very much of a choice. I have come this far, I must go on. My trouble, just now, is I don't know how. I have worn down the soles of my shoes trudging these streets, I have looked up every one of the few survivors, I have been through the shelves of the public library, I have taken half-page ads in both languages... what more can I do?"

"You have tried all that can be done in daytime... the obvious, the ordinary... You haven't attempted the transactions of the night... mind, I do not recommend you do anything of the kind, it's far too unpredictable... far too dangerous..."

"I am long past recommendations, I don't care for warnings... let me be the judge of just how far I am prepared to go!"

"If you are so determined, I may be able to help... mind, I am not making any promises and I must warn you such transactions may have consequences... consequences that no one can foresee... here, take my card... I am not practising any more, I haven't for some time... they took away my licence... politics, professional jealousies, the usual ignorant complaints..."

The card is unilluminating. It has on it a name I have never come across. Of the many capital letters after the name, none of them means a thing to me. The address indicates a little cul-de-sac, somewhere on the outskirts, a nondescript area of which I am only vaguely aware.

Nevertheless, it is to this address that, by mutual consent, we direct our steps. Steps which are painfully slow because the old man has great difficulty in walking and stubbornly refuses any help. So, by the time we reach his house, a house built in the good old times, built with some pretensions, the light is fading fast.

Inside, despite the prominence of lamps with grey, yellowish shades, the light is not much better. But there is enough of it to outline an interior furnished originally with careful attention to imported taste and expensive detail, now, alas, in a state of terminal neglect. Some supports of the staircase balustrade are missing, Turkish carpets are threadbare. Damp, rising from below and spreading from above, has peeled, here and there, the ornate wallpaper off the walls, revealing rough, pock marked plaster underneath. The inlay on tables and chests is a mosaic of cracks, curling slivers of walnut veneer and spaces where veneer once used to be. Chairs, of all sorts, litter the rooms in irregular formation, their padded seats knocked out of shape, springs loose, tufts of horsehair peeping through. Legions of books, some upright ranged against a wall, others lying idly, unread in piles on desk and floor, all gathering the dust that covers the entire habitation in a musty shroud of powder grey.

From somewhere deep within, the smell of a meal being prepared, fills insistently the atmosphere between us, as we converse. It is a smell most particular, germane

to the place, and familiar to me from my earliest days. I am invited, in rare terms of politeness, to partake of what is said to be a modest offering.

The supper, served by a woman of undefined status and indeterminate age, is something of a minor repast. Its four courses, from starters to dessert, have always been my well known favourites. Each dish tastes precisely as it tasted at my very first home.

The drink, on the other hand, is unfamiliar. Generously poured from a swan-necked shaped glass decanter throughout the meal, it is a variety of wine, if wine it be, altogether strange. In colour a rich red burgundy, in texture slippery smooth, it has a flavour both bitter and very, very sweet.

The conversation across the table is somewhat one sided and, generally, anecdotal in tone. The stories, extracted from his practice, seem to entertain him and tend to illustrate the perils inherent in the work. Also, inevitably, the magnitude of his own achievements. They disturb me, they also raise my hopes.

With tiny traces of the meal still evident on his beard, with his eyes ever more intense, we adjourn to what my host calls his “room”. I take my place on the couch, a couch that is the room’s only recognisable piece of furniture. The rest fade into the background, their outline lost in a light that is decidedly dim. My head feels heavy, I wonder if it’s the effect of the drink. The old man’s face is so close to mine, that I can make out the individual filaments of wiry, white hairs on his chin.

The face keeps coming nearer until it blocks out everything but itself. I see the face, then the upper half, then only the two eyes. Finally just one single eye, a large, burning, luminous disc that absorbs the whole of my awareness, leaving no place for the world or me.

My father walks into the room. I am surprised how well he looks, how well he moves, considering his age and that he has been dead for a good many years.

“Son,” he holds forth in a confidential tone, with the customary precise articulation of his native tongue “you should never forget your mother’s suffering. She has been through a lot, more, much more than a life’s fair share. She is not as strong as we are. We are made of sterner stuff. She is such a fine, sensitive creature, she needs protecting. A great deal of protecting. I tell you this, because I have been sometime too busy to be always around. I’ve had so many cares, so many worries, I could not pay her as much attention as I would have liked. I have tried, from the very beginning I have tried. I promised I would not let her be hurt by anyone, by anything, anywhere, anytime. I promised I would look after her. I promised it when I first took her into my arms.”

With these words he turns away to face a woman stepping out of a white bridal gown. There is some hesitation in her manner, shades of doubt and suppressed

excitement struggle to mould a facial expression deeply imprinted on my memory. But she is younger than I remember my mother ever to have been. He looks into her eyes, insisting that she believe his word, a word given unconditionally, given well before the bestowing of the ring. After some time, some thought, after a visible conflict of shifting emotions, there is a sigh, and a sweet, self deprecating smile lights up a lovely face, indicating she has reluctantly allowed herself to be convinced.

He selects a record, puts it on the gramophone, winds up the handle. To the popular strains of a slushy, romantic air, breasts pressed hard against a chest that keeps expanding, they turn round and round in a little circle, not noticing that the music has slowed to a halt.

He takes her away but comes back on his own, in the very prime of his life, eyes a sparkle, heart bursting with pride, announcing to an indifferent world the shattering news: it's a boy, a boy, a boy...

My father, a father new born, flings open a curtain to demonstrate a mother nursing her babe. The child, as all children whose life is still measured in days, is indistinguishable, to unbiased observers, from many others of the same age. The mother, clearly in an altered state, is shamelessly seduced by a love that, taking her by surprise, has divided her heart. Infatuated, she bends her head over the child, cooing and murmuring and uttering soft sounds that make no sense.

His father takes the baby out of a mother's cuddling arms, lifts him high over his head, and, encouraged by maternal protestations, performs a clumsy pirouette.

The other, with the baby safely repossessed, turns to me with an exclamation: "A wild man. Such a wild man..." I would like her to go on, to elucidate. There must be more to this remark than the little incident could possibly justify. But by the time my questions are ready to be asked, it's too late. She is gone and on her return the baby is a toddler, trying to make his way in the world on his own two feet. In the distance, a father to urge him on. Hovering behind him, the hands of a mother eager to pick him up even before he is about to fall.

Right now, mother is absent. She is in for a big surprise. Her child stands on top the bookcase, afraid to jump. He has climbed from chair to table to chest to upper shelf, on a course rigged up by his father who stands by, ready for all eventualities and winks at me with his left eye. Mother coming in, stops in her tracks. She emits a little scream, then rushes forward and, in relief, in anger, snatches her child off his high perch. Turning her back to a sheepish figure, she addresses her complaints directly to me:

"Have you ever seen such crass stupidity! That a grown up man should get up to these, to these childish tricks... and it's no use saying that it's not dangerous... that nothing can happen, that nothing can go wrong... why take chances, why tempt fate..."

I would like to talk to her, to say a few things, to try to make her understand, but she is obviously not inclined to listen. In any case, such scenes have suffered too many repetitions, father is incorrigible, the triangular pattern is already well and truly set.

The principal bedroom is in disarray. Half full, half empty suitcases, of fine canvas, with their broad leather straps undone, are spread over a made up, conjugal bed. The little boy of scarce two years is wreaking havoc with layers of clothes waiting their turn to be, or not to be, packed. Mother, hesitant in the middle of room, having to make choices, appears lost. She is talking to me in a thoughtful, conversational mode.

“It’s far too early in the year for this trip. It is still cold in the North and unsettled in the South. If we’ll have a few warm days of brilliant sunshine, they are sure to be followed by long spells of nasty storms... Having delayed our honeymoon for three years, I don’t understand why we could not wait another month or two. But then your father always has his reasons and what I say somehow never counts... How can I possibly know what to pack?! I can’t take the entire wardrobe, but there isn’t much I can leave out, yet he insists we travel light... And another thing, is it right, I ask you, is it right to leave a one year old child with relations, for such a long period of time?”

I would like to answer this question, but I know no answer will help to extinguish the source of her doubt. So I keep my silence and hope for another, more conducive, occasion to reach the timid recesses of her much troubled heart.

We are travelling East, in a first class compartment of a train that seems resolved, with all the station stops loitering on the way, to reach its predetermined goal. Mother is alone, although accompanied by a maid and her two boys, one a toddler, the other four and a bit. The older one is a nuisance, rushing in and out of compartments, racing along crowded corridors with the maid in hot pursuit. The toddler is chubby, sweet natured, content to pass the time fiddling with his teddy, cushioned in the comfort of a well sprung, velvet covered seat.

It is hot. I sense the rocking motion of the carriage. I listen to the squealing cry of wheels as they turn, over and over, on long unyielding lines of steel. Steel held by endless rows of sleepers, each firmly buried in a bed of granite chippings that will never wear away. I hear mother’s voice drifting towards me from a corner of the carriage where she is held hostage by premonitions that adapt well and readily change their shape.

“I am not at all sure it’s a good idea... it’s such a long way from home, and the children maybe too young to be exposed to all that sun, all that glaring heat... they may enjoy paddling in the sea but they can’t swim, and that’s another thing... it means having to keep an eye on them all the time, I cannot trust that girl... anyhow, the place is so primitive, God alone knows what the facilities are like... He wouldn’t come with us, of course, as usual...the business, always the business... at the very least he should

have been with us for the first few days, to see us settled in... I have asked him, but it's no use... he's always sure that everything will turn out just fine... just fine..."

Mother would like me to take her side. To affirm she is right. Or, if I cannot endorse her demand, to acknowledge her doubt, to feel, for a passing moment, the substance of her anxiety. I cannot find appropriate words of support, but the smile of my understanding eyes should indicate to her that, for the first time in my life, I am ready to listen and pay some attention to what she is all about.

I do not know if she has noticed the profound change in her regard I underwent so recently, for her eyes have a vacant look as they stare, without comprehension, at the passing countryside. The countryside which is now back to front, for the train has reversed direction. We are travelling West, homebound.

We are in the same compartment, but there is no toddler and the maid has disappeared. The older boy, so full of life on the way out, lies, shivering in high fever, on the lap of the family practitioner. Father, silent, grim, is pacing the corridor, which is bereft of passengers. It's not yet the time for the folk to return from summer resorts.

Mother, is sitting alone in the corner furthest from the window, a corner largely deprived of natural light. I am shocked by the sudden transformation in her appearance. She has aged overnight. Acute distress has marked her face with permanent lines. The eyes have lost their lustre. They are framed in a dark rim of mourning black. Beneath them small bags of puffed skin are now all that is left of the pools of tears shed over many nights of agonising sleeplessness. She speaks in a whisper, lest anyone but the two of us should hear her lament.

"It is your father... it is he who is to blame. It was his idea... it was he who sent me there... with two little children, on my own... we should never have gone... I had to call the doctor... with such high temperature, what else could I do... there were no other doctors... by the time we got to the hospital it was too late... too late, too late... he killed my little one... he killed him with those injections... he poisoned, he poisoned them, he is sure to have killed them both..."

Mother takes a long breath, looks furtively around, and linking the two men together by the bitter chains of her reproach, whispers softly on.

"They tell me that he'll live. I do not believe it. Look at that poor body... it's all limp... and the head, it's on fire... how many days since he's eaten... he's hardly breathing for God's sake... it's just the same as with his little brother... there's no chance... too late, too late... they are lying to me and they think I don't know... but I know, I know only too well... by the time we get home it'll be all over... I will have lost them both... it is the end..."

Taking a last look at the fevered child as he lies dying on the doctor's lap, mother shuts her eyes and with a final sigh of deep resignation, buries her pain-distorted face in the upturned palms of her delicate hands.

From the railway station, a meeting point of tearful reunions and departures filled with ambitious hope, mother leads me home. Straight to the apartment where I was nurtured almost from birth. We are alone, except for the four year old boy who, somewhat miraculously, has not died after all. In fact, he seems to have recovered all his former powers and is almost as much of a nuisance as he has been all along.

Mother also has made something of a recovery. Her face is more composed. The bags under her eyes are virtually gone, the black lines of mourning are much faded, an occasional, half hearted smile struggles to display itself on her lips. But it is my impression that she has irrevocably changed. An abiding cast of sadness has confined every expression on that moving, oversensitive face. A well of tears, nigh inexhaustible, threatens to spill over to moisten two restless eyes of its own accord. The eyes themselves appear to look, with suppressed terror, into a future that contains one deadly blow suffered already and another, yet to fall. She speaks now with the authority of one whose fears have been justified and with the fear of one who suspects the unknown and expects the worst.

“They have taken away my little one... there wasn’t any reason, there wasn’t any need to go away... we were just fine here, we lacked nothing... our own trusted people, family, friends, everything familiar, everything to hand... yes, I know he suffers, he too feels pain... I see it sometimes when he looks into the nursery, but it’s nothing like the same, it’s not what ails me, what eats my heart every minute of every day... he doesn’t even begin to understand, how can he? He’s so busy, he has so much to fill his time, so many things that cannot wait, that need achieving, that absorb his mind and must alleviate the pain... I have but this huge and monstrous emptiness, here inside me, inside myself where the little love was formed, and lived and grew into my happiness... you can’t imagine how sweet my baby was, how quiet, how content... he hardly ever cried and when he did cry, it was not, like with the others, a shrill scream, demanding his entitlements... such a love, how can he even talk about another baby, another child as a kind of replenishment... but then he’s always into the future, never mind what is here now, what has survived against the odds from the past... They have taken away my little one, I shall never let go of the one that is left...”

She has her arms round the four year old boy and is holding him close to her breasts in something like a suffocating embrace. Stroking his hair, kissing his head, she continues talking to me, as if I were the one sent to justify her words.

“I shall not let go, I shall be with him all the time, I shall never let him out of my sight... no more crazy excursions with his father, no more wild games with his friends... they tell me there’s nothing wrong with him, he’s quite normal, nothing to worry about, I know now a lot better than that... I shall watch him like a hawk, I shall be behind his every step, I shall be looking out for all those little signs that

are so conveniently dismissed, those little signs that warn of things to come, there will no more surprises... yes, I know the specialists are happy, I know they've filed away the case, but don't tell me all is now well with him, all is just exactly as it was before... after the poison, after weeks of raging fever, after being so near... so damn near lost, don't tell me there is no weakness left in the heart of the child, no frailty in his poor body, no, no...from now on I shall overlook nothing... a cough, a chill, a sore throat, a tummy bug, a little temperature, loss of appetite, any swelling anywhere... will be taken account of, treated seriously... they may not mean much in the case of an ordinary child, with him it's different, with him they might be the beginning of heaven knows what..."

With the child on her knees, they page through a colourfully illustrated book of fairy tales, sharing between them the secret of happy endings and the promise of eternal life. On turning the pages, she still has the time to let flow the drift of her woes.

"It's going to be difficult, but I must somehow stop him being overexcited, charging around like something demented... he's so sudden, you never know what's he is going to do next... one minute he's quiet, playing peacefully with a favourite toy, you blink an eye and he's exploded into action leading you never know where... he will have to calm down, he'll have to be made to see that some things are just too dangerous for him... he'll have to accept that he's not allowed to wander off anywhere he fancies, that he's not free to roam, free to follow his father, wherever that wild... that wilful man happens to go... he'll stay here... by me... we'll always be together... we'll learn to be happy just the two of us, we don't need anybody else..."

The last words invoke the aching absence of the missing child. The well of tears floods over, moistens the mother's eyes and in desolate little dribblets reaches the watchful face of the surviving child.

"What can I tell him when he asks? That there has been some terrible mistake? That God chose to punish me because I have had too great a share of happiness? That his little brother is gone forever and that he will never see him again? That his own life was just about lost? That my daily promise to safeguard his sleep, to banish his nightmares, to ensure that he wakes up in the morning, are meant merely to comfort and have nothing to do with the truth?!"

The boy, in possession of the stark facts, aware of the danger, conscious of the loss, is smothered in his mother's kisses and uncontrolled sobs.

"He is all I got left... you must surely see, I can never let him go..."

There are now just the two of us left, facing each other, mother and I, very close. Her hair has gone grey, the lines on her gentle face are etched with precision to commemorate a calamity that occurred many, many years ago. Her eyes, though, are

much the same. Sad, loving, bright with anxiety. The voice is not the voice of blame, not even of reproach, it is that of resignation, much harder to bear.

“Once you left home, my life was really over... you were always in such a hurry, so desperate to go... to go outdoors, to play with bigger and bigger boys... except at night time, just before sleep overcame your ferocious determination to stay awake... and when you woke in the middle of a nightmare, terrified, in pain... you forgot all the stories I have read you, over and over, in your own special edition, with the worse bits, which you knew by heart and couldn't bear repeated, carefully excised... you forgot the thousand cakes I baked to your own individual requirements... you forgot the hands that rubbed away your pain, the hands always ready to shield your poor, defenceless head from its own worst turbulence... you forgot my love and left me... left to fight a war afar, left to settle in a foreign land... you left and took away my heart, leaving behind a childless mother going through the motions of a meaningless life... at first I couldn't quite believe it... your father kept promising you would return... but then it dawned on me, with a slow, cruel certainty, that I would be reduced to just visits and letters... the letters less and less frequent, the visits more and more charged with hopeless expectations... I had hoped, after all the troubles we've been through, I had hoped to see you grow up here and have around me children once more... I always believed that because of what happened, when we came back on the train, when we came home from those hospitals, when we were left alone to cope, we grew so close together that nothing in the world could come between us, nothing could ever separate us again... my love for you is as it's always been, but I have to go now... God bless you... you need waste no time grieving, we parted a long, long time ago...”

“No, no, hang on a minute, you can't go yet, I have something to tell you, something we never knew, something we both failed to understand...”

I hear words come tumbling out of my mouth, my hands reach forward to hold her back. They grasp at nothing, she has disappeared into thin air.

I am half sitting, half lying on a couch, in a room dimly lit, having for company the relic of a bygone age. A shrunken old man, with a sparse, pointed little beard and two piercing eyes, is looking at me with some concern. He is vaguely familiar but I don't know him. I do not recognise the room. I have no idea how I came to be here.

The old man keeps muttering words that are probably meant to reassure me. I pay no attention. I am trying to retrace my steps to the most recent landmark of my personal history. What has led me here? Why am I here? Who is this little old man? He talks to me if not as a friend, at least as a good acquaintance. He refers to a recent conversation, a meal we have shared. He seems convincing. I have the strange sensation that I know him, that I've been in this room before, that there is a perfectly good reason for me to be here.

It's just that I've lost the thread of my life, I've got to find it again. I must make an effort. I must concentrate.

I look around the room, I look at the man, his moving lips. I try to assign meaning to his words. I gaze at the only door, the door we must have come through. I try to cast my mind back, but there's nothing there, not a single clue.

As if just woke from a profound sleep, still at the mercy of my senses, still lacking any connection, recognition, identity. Except for the awareness that this is not a fleeting after-effect of a dream, not a split second transition to normality.

Something is wrong. Something terrible has happened to me, but I can't believe it's true. The thing is not to panic. Think. Reflect. There must be an answer. Or a question the answer to which will open the floodgates of my dormant memory.

Where was I just before coming here? Where did I sleep last night? The night before, the night before that? What of any significance have I done today? Yesterday? This week? This year? What do I do every day? Where do I live? How do I earn my living? Where do I belong? Who and what belongs to me?

I look at my clothes. They fit, they are well worn but they seem to belong to someone else. I look at my hands. They are quite familiar but they are the hands of an anonymous, ageing man.

The room is real enough. It is self contained and within it everything, whether animate or not, has its customary place. A carpet is spread on the floor, curtains cover the windows, the old man is pacing up and down and I, shaken, on a decrepit leather couch, try desperately to preserve a sense of normality.

But I cannot help wondering what lies outside this room. What other rooms? Which kind of house? The address? A number, a street, the name of the town? I cannot recall any of it.

Names. What names come to mind? I have never been any good at remembering names, but just now I can't think of a single one. Public figures constantly in the news, long standing acquaintances, life long friends, colleagues at work, one and all have lost their names and, nameless, vanish into grey obscurity.

But I have, must have, a family. I feel certain of having a wife, having a wife and children. They should be here or hereabouts. They cannot be far away. Though at present without names, without faces, sooner or later, surely, they are bound to come back to me.

With a shudder, in painful disbelief, I realise I cannot remember my name.

Questions formulate themselves with increasing alacrity and in the absence of any answers I am unable to stem their menacing tide. Each unsatisfied demand breeds other, even more obvious demands, demands I cannot meet and unmet they pursue me and conspire to erode my sense of sanity.

I feel at a loss as to everything. There is no firm ground any more under my feet, no tangible support I can lay my hands on, nothing around which I can call, with any degree of certainty, my own. Suspended in a vacant space, somewhere between the future and the past, a new kind of fear has taken hold of me. Not the anxiety of things to come, it is the terror of losing everything I ever had. Even losing me, myself.

I am now too frightened to search, to try to find a vital clue, lest I uncover an unbearable absence. Each new blank is a painful shock which reveals nothing but warnings of other blanks behind every empty space. But frightened as I am to probe, I cannot stop.

The knowledge that, till so recently, held me secure in its comforting certitudes, is now a tormenting need, the itching nerve of a missing limb.

The soothing words of the little man with the funny old beard are of no use to me. I cannot listen, talk, think, move or do anything, on the strength of the ludicrous premise that I came into being here and now, materialising out of nowhere, in a state of befuddled senility. I know perfectly well that I have made my way in the world, that I've paid my dues, that I am a man of some importance, a family man with a comfortable life style and a good standing in the community. It's intolerable, it's maddening that I cannot say anything about that man, his past, his friends, his family.

It is impossible to believe that all of them were cut off from me, without any warning, just like that. I feel they are right here, near me, behind some opaque, impenetrable barrier. I try to go round but it extends in all directions and has no reachable edge. I try, with all my ingenuity, to discover a hidden fracture through which I may catch a glimpse of the other side. Nothing doing. It's solid, smooth, seamless.

With mounting frustration, I hurl the whole of my incoherent rage against the barrier, in a blind attempt to smash through only to find my hands gripping a cut of velvet which reeks of stale tobacco and the must of antiquity. The velvet forms the lapels of a smoking jacket worn by the wizened old man, a man shaken by the violence of my attack. Arms raised to ward off a furious torrent of screaming questions raining down on his unprotected head, the old man protests his innocence.

"I did warn you of the dangers... I did tell you of possible consequences... it's not the kind of affair that can be foreseen with any degree of certainty... I did not recommend it... I went out of my way not to recommend it..."

Such and such like words of self justification are of no interest to me. I have no way of judging their veracity. I don't care whether the man is lying or telling the truth. He is the only one who knows anything about me. He is the only one who seems to have been here where it must have happened, he is the one who has to answer for it all.

Despite the ferocity of my insistence, he claims he doesn't know me. Knows virtually nothing about me, met me for the first time this very day, has not even been

introduced to my name. Keeps talking in impersonal generalities, offers to do for me whatever he can, makes some suggestions which are of no immediate use.

We spend the time going round in circles, still in the same room, repeating questions and repeating answers, without getting anywhere. Without recovering what I have lost. But I can't see what else I can do. I have no desire, at my age, to start afresh all over again. Especially from a point of departure, with no intersecting life lines through it, set in random time, in arbitrary space.

Eventually, long after the initial panic, after the disbelief, the incomprehension, the overwhelming rage, after the onset of grief, after exhaustion sets in, a name does strike a chord. In the state I am in, I cannot remember if the man mentioned it once or twice before.

It's the name, I think, of the town where I was born. Where I grew up, where I went to school. Where everything I ever did, everything that ever happened to me, had a lasting, incalculable, effect.

Hanging grimly on to this name, I move from a devastated, barren present back to a distant, fragile past. No matter how fragile, that is the only destination I am left.

CHAPTER XXV

MEMORIES LOST

A sepia coloured postcard with the name on it. In slender, cursive italics. A gothic church with steeply angled, red tiled roofs, the statue of a massive king on horseback flanked by flags and noble warriors on foot, a wide open space with unheeding passers by, children in the foreground, absorbed in their game. On the reverse side, a few lines of slanted script I cannot read, two stamps I vaguely recognise and a circular postmark with that name again and faded numbers too pale to date.

A photograph in a silver frame. Family grouping: man, woman, child in between. The name, the name of my town, pencilled in the right bottom corner followed by numbers which suggest a date. Twenty six (the day?), five (the month?), other numbers, perhaps indicating the year, covered by the frame. The man, in his mid thirties, eyes deep set, looking straight ahead, I recognise to be my father. The woman, refined, eyes lingering on the child, I recognise to be my mother. The child in between, an inquiring boy of maybe three, looks into the camera. He, I suppose, must be me.

The postcard and the photograph usher me into a comfort zone of other meaningful stills, each of which supersedes the one before. What is disturbing is that the stills are aligned in reverse order. Instead of the child growing up and, in memorable stages, coming closer to me, evocation after evocation moves him back in time, towards an undifferentiated world. A world without thought, without language, a world of most dubious identities.

The place of my birth, with its unique character, which makes it what it is, pales thus by degrees into an ordinary town. Her buildings, redolent of period architecture, lose their distinct gabled windows, their ochre yellow plasterwork, the softly arched entrances to their intimate courtyards, the heavy iron hinges of their recessed front doors, leaving behind just regular streets of standard houses that can be found anywhere, anytime.

The face of my father, its strong features so sharply defined, loses, little by little, its attention commanding immediacy. Gone are the angular bushy eyebrows, the deep set, sparkling brown eyes, the ramrod nose, the heavy cut in the middle of a

prominent chin, the tight-lipped mouth which, once in a while, quite unexpectedly, opens wide in unbridled laughter. What remains is still the face of a man, with all features in their rightful place, but it's an unlined face and not, specifically, the face of my father.

My mother's face was never quite so distinct. True, her dark, slightly bulging eyes had a uniquely loving look, and the contours of her cheeks had a curve of special loveliness, but it was the range, the richness, the volatility of its expressions that made her face so memorable. It is precisely this latency, this impending change, this trembling on the edge, that I find fading away. As she retreats further and further, the face becomes the face of just any mother, any mother in her prime, caring for a child who seeks refuge in her arms, which are always wide open.

I try with the strength I've got left to arrest this backward slide. I try to reverse the direction of the move, to bring whatever remains of me to my present, as I'm now. It's no use. The still pictures that are mine to grasp, are aligned backwards, all pointing to where I am desperate not to go, all dragging me towards oblivion.

The name of the town where I was born, the name which struck a chord in the silence of my past and gave me a brief moment of hope, that name is now gone. As are other names, the names of people, places, things, they are all gone.

So are the streets, so are the buildings. There are no solid structures, just vague outlines of habitations. The sense of being inside or outside, depends on the available warmth, and whether a breeze brushes softly against my face. Outside, there are creatures who run along the ground, barking as they move, and creatures who fly up above me in the air, silent except for the sound of their flapping wings. Inside, there are things that do not move, hard things, large and small, shaped to climb on, some with difficulty, some with ease.

As for humans, my kind of beings, except for two, they have all disappeared. The two who are left, are at once familiar and complete strangers to me. Familiar, because it feels as though they have always been around. Strangers, because they are both giants who speak a language I do not understand.

They tower over me from so close by that I can only see parts of them at any one time, never the single being in its vast entirety. I see a hand reaching down perhaps to stroke my head, but I see no markings to distinguish it from any other hand. At another time, I see a hand swoop to pick me up, again no markings to set it apart. Any hand is just a hand and all hands are one and the same to me.

Lips approach to whisper nonsense in my ear. Lips descend to trawl my face with a long, searching kiss. Lips, whenever they come and whatever they do, they are just lips and all lips are one and the same to me.

Legs stand wide apart. Legs stand close together. Legs hurry along, they recede, they draw near, they move all around me, they nearly knock me over. Legs, however they stand and wherever they move, they are just legs and all legs are one and the same to me.

And yet, and yet. Even now, having slipped so far back, unable to recognise my own parents, unable to distinguish the particular features of my first home, to identify clearly what is dear to me, even now, the very last stills of that distant past, worn, smudged, distorted as they are, these stills have retained enough power to draw one sharp, memorable line. The line between the two giants. The line that runs right through the middle of my world and leaves me entrenched in the deepest of all human divides.

For I cannot fail to notice that one set of legs stands more firmly and has a heavier tread. That there are lips which eat me with kisses and lips whose loud kisses smack of manly pride. Lips that whisper, cajole, caress and lips that tease, demand, alert. That one hand is soft and soothes, the other is hard and grips. That one set of legs, lips and hands goes with one giant and the second set belongs to the other one. And the two giants, are not at all one and the same to me.

Since these awesome figures cannot be encompassed from any one fixed position of my eye, I circle them, sniffing, feeling, listening, viewing, as I go cautiously around.

No matter from where I look, how much or how little of them I glimpse, the contrast is striking. The defining lines of one figure are always those of a softly curved crescent moon, the defining lines of the other are consistently rigid, angular, strict.

The same with the voice. I do not comprehend what they say, but whatever the distance and direction of the emanating sound, one voice is always uncertain, concerned, high-pitched, the other invariably abrupt, deep, firm.

The two feel utterly different to the touch. The surface of one figure is smooth and yields, that of the other is rough and does not give.

As for smell, each figure has its own rich, highly individual scent, warning of a presence from afar, and lingering on departure for quite a while. The scents are indescribably personal. One is reminiscent of a flower that does not exist, the other refers vaguely to an active body, having been hard at work. Yet, strangely, the two scents, even when they occupy the same space, never mix.

One of the figures, the one outlined in softly curving moons, is never far away. She carries me about and attends to all my needs. The other figure, the rough one, comes and goes. His comings are unpredictable, his leaving always clean cut.

When he is not there, she lets me do, more or less what I want. I am free to roam the full expanse of her smooth skin, to prod, pinch and bite those softly curving moons of flesh that do not resist. She does her best to please me when I am hungry or too

replete, when I am sleepy but refuse to fall asleep, when I am bored, when something I must absolutely have is just outside my reach. Even though she does not always understand and, often, I have to scream.

When he is not there, gigantic as she is, it is I who set the agenda, it is I who set the pace. When he is not there, we two get along just fine. I move first and she has to follow. I invent the rules by which we play, I dictate the terms on which we live together. And if she plays too well and has learnt the terms by heart, I change the rules and impose new terms, terms without prior consultation, without agreement, without even seeking her consent.

Well before I hear the sound of a heavy tread, in watching the subtle changes in her general demeanour, I already know he is on his way, his arrival imminent. For one thing, in pressing my head against the softness of the breasts, I note her heart is beating faster. For another, she is fussing. Whilst trying to censor my own movements, she keeps rearranging herself and scurries to move everything else about. Beyond what I can see and hear and touch, there is an air of expectancy at such times that I sense in her, in me, in between us, and all over the place. And what I sense is an excitement which inhabits both fear and desire.

When he comes, he comes straight at me, arms stretched out. His hand is ready to seize, to lift, to carry. His lips are open, his teeth are bare, his deep voice reverberates. The personal scent of his presence invades the enclosed space in which all three of us are constrained to live.

As he leans over me, his bulky figure obscures the sunlight and his angular shadow covers almost the entire floor. The rigid fingers of his strong hand dig playfully into the sides of my puny body, not so roughly as to hurt but roughly enough to warn that, with a little more pressure, they easily could. Amidst thunders of laughter I am precipitously elevated onto a high table, there to be confronted with a drumbeat of words whose meaning escapes me. But I can tell by the intonation that they are framed in the interrogatory mode, requesting a verbal response I do not have the means to deliver.

The lack of appropriate words at my disposal does not seem to put him off. He is satisfied with my attempts to mimic his movements, more than pleased with my natural inclination to echo his laughter. To my surprise, he is amused by all of my antics and applauds all of my deeds, so long as they are sudden, done fast and cause general havoc. But his interest in me, though intense, is periodic. At any one time, it's short lived.

She is the principal focus of his pointed attention. His main energies are reserved for her. The two giant figures, sliding into and out of my presence, perform a selfish dance entirely for their own good. But it's a dance that holds me spellbound, it's a dance I can never afford to ignore.

They dance to a tune provided by their own voices. The lyric consists of words, of humming notes, of silences and strange sounds that range wildly from rumbling roars of triumph to hysterical screams. The two voices do not sing in unison, but there is a strong, compelling beat to the music which keeps both of them in step and cleaved one to the other.

They dance a dance of many moves. Some moves are quietly thoughtful, others brash, loud and over the top. Some are languid, some frenetic, some sadly disappointing, some of rapturous joy. Some formal, serious, even grave, others funny, exhilarating, gay. Most of the moves are traditional, acquired, well rehearsed, a few are original, improvised, spanking new.

They dance a dance of many moves, and he takes the lead at every move. Wherever he leads, she follows his every lead. She follows his lead not without hesitation, not without reluctance, trembling a little, because she is unsure where the move will lead her and doesn't know what the future may bring.

They dance a dance of many moves, describing what to me becomes a confusingly familiar pattern. Throughout it there is a theme which tarnishes all the moves. An ambiguous, haunting theme for two conspiring partners, that from innocent beginnings builds, with periodic inevitability, a furious climax.

Watching from the curtailed space allocated to me between such huge dancing figures, the climax is hidden from view. Precisely what happens at the end remains, for me, a mystery. A profoundly disturbing mystery. But, from various signs and sounds and shameless indications in all that leads up to it, it is plain to me that there is violence at the end.

What is worse, this violence lurks there from the very beginning and accompanies, in the form a promise, every single one of the richly varied moves of the whole intricate choreography.

It's there as they look into each other's eyes. It's there in his approaching swagger, in her retreating turn, inviting his forward reach to reach still further.

Even though conducted in a tongue foreign to me, it is apparent in the shape of their dialogue, perceived by tone of voice, diction, gesture of hand opposing hand. He opens with a silence. She responds with a tentative collection of words that trail, hesitate and then meander. He offers no comment. She continues. He only half listens. She expresses a doubt, asks for approval. He counters with a cutting question. She draws her breath, complains, protests. He repeats the question, setting the volume slightly higher. Flustered, hoping to find favour, she tries to change tack. Interrupting, he hauls her back to his demand, a demand that brooks no denial. She cannot accede, she cannot escape, she lowers her eyes, raises her arms and tones her voice down to a thin whisper. In a staccato rhythm, in incisive phrases, he insists she responds with

words she'd rather not utter. Leaning forward, open palm chopping the air, under a hail of penetrating truths, he has her trapped in a pit of words, where she cowers, unprotected, in expectant silence.

It's there in the way he likes to surprise her with his news and charm her with gifts most unexpected, in the way he holds her in suspense before resolving what is about to happen.

It's there in her manner of waiting upon him, of placing dish after dish in front of his excessive expectation, of keeping him at bay and not yielding without an elaborate show of defiance.

It's there in the possessive stretch of his arm as it moves to surround her shoulders, in her wriggling out of his embrace, in his hands gripping her wrists, in her resistance to being drawn any closer.

It's there in the cycle of his coming and going, in his daily departure and nightly return as he presents proudly the loot of his travels in atonement. It's there in her being tethered to a fixed location, in her acquiescence, in her ambiguous welcome. In the undisguised anxiety which contorts the features of her face on the occasion of each and every departure.

The promise of violence to come is apparent all the time I watch the two giants dancing. I see it in their movements, I hear it in the music to which they dance. But there is something else there in that dance, masked by the promise, masked so well that I can neither see nor hear it.

Silent, invisible, but I feel it. I feel it before the dance begins and long after it's ended. And this presence is so tangible, so all invasive, that it must have been at the heart of the dance from the very beginning.

No matter where she hides it, how cleverly it is concealed, he lights upon it, unerringly, at the point of his entry. He picks it up, gathers up all its strands, brings it alive, grows it to monstrous proportions. Then, with a loving flourish in mid-dance, offers it for her consumption.

She, well practised in the move, takes the offering and, still in mid-dance, without batting an eye, gulps it all down.

And what she tries to conceal, what he discovers, amplifies, what he rams down her throat, is raw, elemental, fear. The kind of fear that has no object. The kind of fear that can take any form. Even that of a promise, the promise of violence to come.

And the meaning of the dance, the selfish dance that has me in its thrall, is the definition of that fear. Its confinement. Its celebration. Its disposal.

For even I, in my puny understanding, know that such fear cannot be allowed to spread, unheard, unseen, shapeless, to contaminate the general air of well being.

For even I, in my puny understanding, know that for us to breathe freely, there has to be someone to take hold of this fear, to give it a point, to implant it in a receptive

body, a body he masters, a body set against his own. And that someone can be no other than the giant figure dancing right in front of my eyes. He, the man born without fear.

For even I, in my puny understanding, know that for us to breathe freely, there has to be someone to accept this gift, to take it to heart. Someone to carry this fear within and exhibit it without, for the sake of the dance and all those who are dancing. And that someone can be no other than the giant swirling sweetly around. She of the soft curves whose surface is smooth and, to my touch, easily yielding.

Watching the dance of the many moves, from such a restricted space and so lowly a position, I cannot tell when and how I, myself, became a dancer. But now I am caught up in their moves, tossed about between two giants, turning and turned, twisting and twisted, in a circular movement not of my designing, impervious to my orders.

For a precocious me, it takes no time at all to learn the steps and follow the pattern. She envelops me, he hurls me forward. He lifts me high, she lays me down. She holds me tight, he sends me spinning loose, free and easy. He prods me beyond the reach of my endurance, she gathers in her arms the tired bits and pieces. She pulls, he pushes. He wakes me, makes me rise, she lulls me to sleep and snugly tucks in her little sleeping monster.

I can dance with him. I can dance with her. I am a very promising dancer. Dancing with her, to please, I take little polished steps and my turns are sweet and simple. Dancing with him, to please, my turns are wild, I do not step, just run, and leap, and perform summersaults without tumbling over.

I dance with her, I dance with him. I leave her, to reel with him. I abandon him, to mince my steps with hers. I switch partners back and forth, without compunction, guilt or any sense of betrayal.

What I find hard is to dance with both of them at once. To display impartial devotion, at the same time, to her and to him, without favouring either. For the dance is a selfish dance, meant to be danced strictly by two, one to one, one against the other.

When we are three, trying to keep step, tune and rhythm all together, the moves are ragged, the timing is wrong and the whole dance is in shambles. And it is I, much in demand, still just a promising learner, dwarfed by giants on either side, who is the odd one out, the one condemned to suffer.

For in conflicting moves, dancing between her and him, I am simply torn asunder.

Whenever she wants to hold me close in a warm embrace, he is intent on flinging me far into an exciting distance. Whenever he wants to put me on parade, she insists I must be rested. I can't go on, I cannot stay. I have to make a choice. A choice that will please the one and hurt the other. And yet, at this stage of the dance, puny as I am, I cannot afford to disappoint either.

So, being flung high, flying free in the air, I look back to her warm empty arms, with some regret and longing. And ensconced deep in the folds of soft layers of flesh, I see my impatient ambition drowned in the frustration of her excessive kindness.

Therefore, dancing in threesome a dance meant for two, I am, against all natural law, at once in two places. I am moved and moving with cautious steps in her safe, comforting circle, and, at one and the same time, I am moved and moving in his meteoric orbit in sudden leaps and a spectacular posture. So that each of my moves is a double move, facing both up and down, both right and left, both back and forward.

So that no matter how I move, part of me is left still behind to haunt my every movement. And all the time the two of me are desperate to be reunited.

Stretched in painful contortions between two giant dancing figures, limbs pulled apart, body torn to pieces, I have reached the outer limits of my original performance. There can be no room for three in a dance of two halves, each half self contained and, in its selfish greed, desiring nothing beyond one other.

I can no longer remain impartial between the two dancers, devoted equally to both. I cannot take even turns and go on trying to please each in a fair measure. I have to make a choice.

The choice is simple, obvious and brutal. Therefore, for someone so puny, a harsh one. I shall have to dance exclusively with one of the giants and take the place of the other. I shall keep one, and, somehow, try to kill the other.

The choice is simple, obvious and brutal. It's about fear. The raw, elemental fear at the heart of the dance. The fear to be confined and brought to a point. The fear that must be embodied.

As we three dance and engrave ever deeper the lines our steps are describing, I feel the fear move with us, and in moving, its presence is hurting. Because it's unheard, unseen, the fear is everywhere, Because it's unheard, unseen, it's endless. It just keeps growing.

Who can take hold of it? Who is brave enough to give it a shape? Strong enough to force a body to hold it? Whose body is made to yield, to take the fear, to contain its elemental powers? Is it his, is it always hers, can it possibly be mine also?

It cannot be his, his body is too hard, too determined. It must be hers, softly enough made to accommodate even the most extremes of terror.

But could it, perchance, be mine? Could that puny thing, absorb such an enormity? Could it live a terror like that? It is a body neither of rigid muscular substance nor lined with softly sloping curves. It is a body a little like his. It is a body a little like hers. It is a body undecided.

The doubt is hanging over the dance, over two giant figures and a dwarf, a dancing threesome of ill matched partners. Nothing is settled yet, nothing resolved forever.

Fear is the volatile, unformed, substance. The dance of its embodiment must be constantly re-enacted. There is room only for two principal dancers. One to shape fear to his will and inspire with it the other. And the other, who, inspired, has to surrender to fear and consent to carry it for all time, thereafter.

It comes down to a simple choice. Is it to be she? Is it to be he? To be fearful or fearless. To be fearless, I have to acquire his knack, inherit his will, be given the strength to replace him. To be fearful for the rest of my life, I have merely to borrow her heart, learn to inhabit her feelings of dread and be aware of an ever present, imminent danger.

Dancing with him would be fine, if only he was the dwarf and I, the whirling giant. Dancing with her would be better still, if only I knew for sure that in sharing her love, I could never be infected. But dancing with both in an unwholesome three is now, for me, an impossible torment.

It is at this moment, here in mid-dance, before the choice, stretched on a cruel fork of two extremes, caught between prancing giants, with terror unseen and unheard, it is at this moment that time is first frozen.

This is the last one of the stills. The last in the series of yellowed pictures of the past, perversely arraigned in a retreating order. When it fades away, my personal history comes to an end. I am left with nothing but the raw, elemental fear. There is no one to take hold of it, to give it a semblance. No one to carry it with love and devotion forever. For the man born without fear has gone, and so has my poor mother.

I am now alone with the fear, a fear that is constantly growing. A fear now greater than I am. I feel it compressed into my heart, a wildly racing heart, a heart too full, a heart on the point of bursting.

The heart stops beating. In the stillness, I hear a human voice from a long, long way off. It is distant, barely audible, it is hurrying towards me. When it's close enough for words to be distinct, my eyes open.

The voice belongs to a shrunken old man, with a sparse, pointed little beard. He is bent right over me. His agitated fingers, pressed hard on my temples, are drawing repeated clockwise circles on the surface of the skin. The concern on his face is now fading.

In disbelief, I realise at once that this is the man who I just dined with, the man who brought me to his house, the man I've met in the main square of the town, the town where I was born, where, before being born, my life, and what there is left of it, had its very beginnings.

I am conscious of a sense of merciful reprieve. I have found miraculously what I thought I've lost. But the reprieve is tempered by a feeling of uncertainty. I am not sure what exactly I have recovered and whether what I have recovered, is recovered for good.

"I don't mind telling you, you had me worried..." the voice of the old gentleman carries both anxiety and a profound sigh of release "you went quite far... you've been a most unusually long time away... I don't think people, understand the risks involved in taking these kind of trips... they are often undertaken too lightly, warnings are rare and when given, are generally ignored... Of course, I am in no position to know where you've been, whether you did find what you have been looking for... but I think now you will appreciate the dangers I've pointed out on the way..."

"You didn't exactly tell me that I could suffer a complete loss of memory" I hear my voice rise in angry complaint.

"I assure you, such a sudden loss hardly ever occurs, and if it does, it's temporary. You are most unfortunate to have had such an experience, even briefly... I can imagine how upsetting it must be, after all you have nothing but your memories to sustain your sense of identity... what's the use of birth certificates, school reports, passports, photo albums, love letters, if they bear an alien name... what help is it to be told by family and friends, who you are when you cannot recognise them, when you cannot recall what you once shared in action, feeling and in thought..."

"Upsetting?! Imagine?! You have not even the beginning of an idea what I have just been through." My remark is ignored. The discourse, fluent, authoritative, gathers pace. I am incidental to it, but somebody has to be here.

"Without an awareness of the past all you are is an arbitrary meeting place of pleasure and pain, of needs, of appetites, premonitory shivers, unrelated superstitions... without a past there is not even a future, just some immediate, undeniable urge... In effect, at our age, when we sit down, each of us alone, we have to admit that we are no more, and no less, than a collection of our own memories."

The piercing eyes look at me from a face suffused by secretive self satisfaction. Their owner seems to believe that he is imparting privileged information from an undiscovered source, known only to himself. As for his bracketing us in the same age group, I find it objectionable.

"And precisely because that's all we are, the memories we end up with are all important. It wasn't your sudden total loss that really worried me... it is the slow erosion that is the deadly one. My worry was that you may have gained suddenly too much. When the dam of the unremembered is forced open, when events, isolated, dormant in the deep, come all at once bursting through, there is real danger. You may have drowned in those floods of memories... and stayed submerged in another age, suspended in a long discarded time. There was, I admit, always the chance that you wouldn't make it back. A slight chance, but a chance nevertheless..."

I cannot reproach him, it was I who insisted on going back, it was I who took the chance. In any case, lacking courage, it was easier for me to try, unaware of the risk.

“Much more to the point, now that you are safely back in the present, with your faculties unimpaired, are you better off? I presume you met all those you were so desperate to meet? Saw all the things that had to be seen again? Lived all the events that had to be relived? Are you satisfied? Is everything settled, are you are now at peace?”

I am not sure these questions are addressed to me personally or posed to no one in particular and meant for everyone who cares. I keep silent. I prefer to wait and let the man have his say. Pacing the room, hands moving in an expansive, oratorical arc, he is in full academic flow.

“Or, on the contrary, are you disappointed, let down, left with the feeling that nothing significant has been gained? Worse still, perhaps in the wake of the disturbance, what has come to the surface makes everything more difficult? Perhaps, your confusion is now more profound? Your fear even more acute?

You see, it is nowadays so fashionable to assume that moving backwards to confront the past, is always, in all ways, to the good. There is this huge industry at work everywhere to uncover the truth... to demonstrate, once and for all, what really happened years... decades, centuries ago... and having recovered some precious facts, basking in the radiance of a newly minted truth, be it ever so shameful, so horrible, so sad, we are supposed to retire to a life of resigned happiness.

But the past is never dead. Never done with. It is not set, finished, waiting to be framed. It is nothing like that...

Our history moves and changes in line with our lives. We are given a few bits and pieces to which we cling on for dear life... hold them sacrosanct... as for the rest, we look back with compulsive frequency as we move, to retain... to retrieve... to fashion... to compress... to decorate fragments of lives we cannot afford to lose, which we try to accommodate within a self-respecting self... and the resulting tale, which changes with age and the circumstances of the day, we present as our definitive history...”

The manner of his delivery, akin to a revelation, may be a little over the top but there is not much wrong with what the old man says. Without putting it exactly into these words, it is, more or less, what I have come to believe in traversing this whole strange, convoluted world. I feel, though, there is more to it than that. My thoughts, however, are irrelevant to the man. He saw the light, there is no stopping the illuminating flow.

“Mind, I am not saying anything against probing a bit deeper into the past, against a little rewriting of history. Indeed, we cannot help ourselves. The pain of the present may be too much to bear... the temptation to use an improved past may be too great... nothing wrong with that, of course, except that there could be a terrible price to pay...

For the unremembered is not unremembered in vain. We forget what we forget with a great deal of care. How could we have heroes, ideals, otherwise? For that matter, without a selective memory we couldn't even survive.

Waving an admonishing finger, my self appointed tutor raises his voice. “Be warned, rewriting history is a risky business. What you are is not just what you remember, it is also what you have managed to forget. Re-scripting the past is altering the present. Retrieving what, for such a long time you have successfully ignored, will change you. You will never be the man you were before. You will have gained... you will have lost... and you won't know quite what you've gained, quite what you've lost, until later...much later...”

The tutorial does not run its full course. Not waiting for it to reach any kind of conclusion, I take hold of myself, get up resolutely from the couch, and after an elaborate session of leave taking, I see myself politely out of the house.

Walking alone the streets of this no ordinary town, under the canopy of a clear, moonlit sky, I am sad that the little boy who brought me here, no longer tugs at my hand. I feel tears rolling down my face in recognition of those who are now dead, of all that is dear to me and will never come back.

Walking alone the streets of this no ordinary town, I am comforted by the thought that my life, such as it is, has, after all, a story to tell.

The story, I realise, is incomplete. It lacks some classical elements. It is one sided. It is still subject to some change, perhaps even improvement. It has a beginning, something of a middle and an ending mercifully not revealed as yet.

CHAPTER XXVI

DESCENT

I leave the streets of the town where I was born and bred, not through the entrance of my original return. The giant born without fear is nowhere to be seen, his massive legs form no gateway into the town. In any case, there is no need for gates, the surrounding walls are fallen and the streets just run on, and peter out in a now familiar countryside.

I leave the town alone, but I carry with me a revised edition of the relevant past. Although lavishly illustrated, it suffers from a paucity of content and the text is much simplified. Still, it's the only reference work in existence, it'll have to do for the rest of my life.

As I look back, from time to time, on the town receding in the hazy distance, I have the curious impression of minute figures, detached from the background, moving in the direction of my own movement. They do not seem to be gaining on me, neither do they appear to lag further behind.

Scattered smallholdings of noisy farmyard beasts, neatly furrowed fields and silent orchards of old apple trees soon give way to wooded hills and sloping pastures so deep in grass that goat, horse and cattle are content to graze in peace. Then come mountains, dark in forests shunned by man on account of bears, witches, unseen sights and suchlike things to inspire a great variety of terrors.

And so, quite quickly, I find myself back standing on the edge. On the edge of the cemetery of the dying and the dead. The scenery is as I remember it. Variable, fast changing light, a sea of stagnant shallow waters, the stumps of a once redoubtable forest, submerged creatures, fast, ferocious unpredictable. Ensnaring, tangled waterborne vegetation, seductive flowers of a hideous, nocturnal beauty, wings of lumbering predatory birds, rising in search of unsuspecting prey. The unmistakable imprints of deadly violence and terminal pain are still creeping along the unstable, shifting, muddy edge. Evidence of agonising struggles of unhappily departed men. Struggles and agonies that I have as yet not experienced myself.

Terror rules in the place, just as it has always ruled before. But there are subtle changes. Standing on the edge, my attention is no longer captured by each and every

terrifying detail, I am less vigilant, less observant, less compelled. I am still drawn to follow the vicious track along the edge, but I am aware that the track is strictly circular, that it leads nowhere. Any clues that are relevant to me lie in the heart of a queen who lives in the town of my birth. She has the eyes to foresee, and the tongue to describe, the great and wonderful variety of terrible endings.

I retreat, now with greater ease, from that dismal scene to the midst of the spring, where life is always just beginning. Here, too, everything is as I remember it. Trees in bud, nests being built, young females in unstressed, velvetsoft skins, a game of chess in its opening phase, the lucid waters of a narrow brook running clear, close to the source of their first emerging. Bows drawn, a set of string instruments is poised to play a piece of music which will never reach a climax, never come to its conclusion. The introductory chapter to an endless scroll of illuminated text, styled by a monkish hand, waiting to be written. Antlers of red deer, standing in a permanent calm, a fleet of turtles, swimming in their fancy shells against the stream, neither gaining nor losing station, in a balance which is perfect and everlasting. The silken web of transparent threads, woven by a single dragonfly, through which I can see the whole world and understand at once its every, unfolding, instance.

I can still bring time to a virtual standstill and whilst life proceeds at its natural pace, nothing dies, nothing decays, nothing ages.

Everything is as I remember it, there is though a subtle change. Even whilst breathing its intoxicating air, I am not desperate any more to make my home in the heart of the spring. And this not only because to me such refuge, in the nature of things, must be denied. It is more because in the absence of ageing, with no prospect of dying, I could never return to my birthplace, I could not exalt my childhood and enshrine in love what I have lost from my earliest beginnings.

I look once more into the impossible mirror, in which I see myself and, in the same instant, the whole world, the world without me. My place is vacant. The man who is supposed to take my place, he without fear, is also missing. But my eyes can follow his gigantic footprints. Set in stone, the footprints lead straight to the place of my birth, where I first came across him.

I assume he must have stayed there, secure in the formative years of my youth. Now that I've met him at last, now that I've learnt his fearsome secret, I no longer feel the need to pursue him. Disappointing as our recent encounter was, it has served some purpose. I have resigned myself to the fact that despite a lifetime of practice, I shall never replace his formidable being. But when I need a reminder of his exemplary act, at least now I know where to find him.

I note the shoreline of the watery graves is still crumbling. The cemetery, as ever, is on the move. The no man's land dividing the sea of terminal suffering from the

heart of the spring, is still noticeably shrinking. And I continue to commute, back and forth, daily.

But, this time around, I do not cross the no man's land without staying there awhile, even if ever so briefly. This land gives me a chance of repose, a chance to rest from the rigours of my frequent, cyclical journey. And in repose, I find the land suitable, after all, for human habitation. I stay there, nowadays, for varying periods of time, without having to decide immediately my next destination. Whether to bask in the unending spring or monitor the place of the dying.

And even when, on the edge, I follow the circular track imprinted with the final agonies of acquaintances, friends and distant relations, I am a little less disturbed.

For I am satisfied the land of the living is an island in a sea of death and dying but I also believe that the dismal sea is itself enclosed in a continent of all that is alive, and what is not yet in being. **For I now know that, although irrelevant to the world, this contradiction makes sense, because it lives in me, entwined in the core of my very existence.**

By the time I reach the large, ragged, shapeless gap in the irregular wall, which marks the exit and entrance of this, my adventure, the initial shock waves of this revelation have subsided, the serious implications are just beginning to dawn. The contradiction is not an ordinary one, subject to syllogistic resolution. It is an obstinate contradiction, determined to endure. I shall have to learn to live with it. We shall have to come to terms.

What the terms will be, I cannot tell. They will be formulated in tough, painstaking negotiations over a long period of time. Negotiations that will henceforth require most of my attention, a great deal of faith, and all of my native resources.

"I see you are about to leave... are you sure you went back to the very end, saw all there is to see... are you sure you have stayed long enough to discover the source of all your ills... or you leave because you can't take any more, because the pain is too acute, the truth too close to the bone..."

I recognise the deep murmuring voice, insinuating itself from behind my shoulder. It is the voice of my shadow. In the overwhelming multitude of recent events, he has been quite forgotten. Yet it was he who brought me to this pass, it is mainly him I have to curse, or to thank.

With the final outcome still in doubt, I leave his questions unanswered as I go through the shapeless gap in the wall which becomes the first of a succession of strict, pointed arches. Arches leading to a formal edifice of an architecture that defies description. An edifice already, well enough, described.

Having been here once, I find my own way, through the same network of systematic corridors, to the Cathedral of Light. Without being told by anyone, with no inscription

on the doors, I know the name of where I am. First, the design is such that every line is well defined and that which is defined appears at once transparent, luminous and bright. And then, every single thing is positioned artfully, to reflect, to magnify, to celebrate the glory of light itself. Light which alone makes the whole vision credible.

In the centre, facing me, seated on judicial chairs, the five officials of my previous encounter. To their left, engraved in stone, the seven questions concerning death, dying, living and life, now set in a different order. To their right, the curious painting of the naked lady, legs astride on an elevated throne, giving birth to a distorted globe of mercury. Between the officials and me, a square, red velvet cushion on the floor, inviting me to kneel.

I have the impression of being the victim of an ecclesiastical court with logical pretensions, one that requires interrogation, a confession of sorts and an exam. An exam for which no amount of preparation seems to be adequate. The officials speak in unison, with one, uncompromising, voice.

“Since your last passage with us we have had some new material to look at. Perhaps, it would be more appropriate to call it “old” material, albeit regurgitated, recycled, rehashed. Messengers, from distant parts, rarely seen, keep appearing in suspect numbers, with unnatural frequency. We think the time has come for you to set less questions and attempt to answer the ones you, yourself, came here, first of all, to ask.

DYING - HOW? IN WHAT TERRIFYING FORM?

I cannot chose as yet. I have a number of ancestral clues, some leading to greater horrors, others to less. Some resulting in quick surrender, others tend to drag on with heroic resistance to the bitter end. There are still too many options. The noblest and least selfish presupposes unendurable torture or the kind of courage I doubt I'll ever have.

DYING - WHEN? IS THERE TIME ENOUGH?

It is difficult to be precise, but surely no longer in the distant, irrelevant future. It's much too imminent for that. As for the time left, no, it's not enough. But then, it was never meant to be. Acute awareness of its transitory passage, as it ebbs inevitably away, I have inherited in great abundance from both sides of my divided ancestry. I cannot complain since it has nurtured in equal measure both my impatient ambition and fearful anxiety. It's because there is not enough time, that I set out on this journey, that I ever did anything of value, that I did not throw the whole of my life uselessly away.

I know now, it is possible to manipulate the passage of time, and bring it to a virtual standstill, but only in a world where nothing dies and nothing is born anew.

Henceforth the best I can hope for is to move in line with the natural movement of time. Not to despair over what, in a lifetime, has been wasted. To try to complete what I've begun. And prepare for a departure, which if not endowed with dignity, at least is not immersed in shame.

LIFE - HOW? HOW TO LOVE WHAT IS ABOUT TO BE LOST?

The secret of how to love life, when that life is about to be lost, lies in the knowledge of its certain finality. Hitherto my intense love of life was instinctive, seductive, sensual. Now I have to relearn to love life much more selectively. Not because it's there, in all its rich, profound, stimulating diversity, but because it will be soon lost to me.

For if there is any doubt, any uncertainty, if there is a chance that my life may be saved by a miracle, and preserved, more or less as it is, for eternity, then the love, as I have learnt to my cost, will turn from a love of life into an obsessive love of anxiety.

LIFE - HOW? HOW TO ACCEPT THE LOSS OF WHAT I LOVE MOST?

This is just not possible. Life is too dear to me. Maybe, I toy with the idea sometimes, I try to visualise what such a loss would be like. Maybe, I go through the motions of making a will and other customary predispositions for my forthcoming demise, but in the heart of my hearts I do not believe it will ever quite come to that. And judging not by thoughts, reflections and feelings, all so easy, all so unreliable, but by actions for all to see, the evidence is clear. I go about my business, doing what I used to do, so far without making allowances for any end in sight, any end to be.

DEATH - WHY? WHY DOES IT HAUNT ME SO?

Given what had happened in the town of my birth, in those far off days, given that I met him at a particularly awkward age, given that he very nearly took me with him on that most unfortunate of first encounters, as he took my baby brother away, given that he came to inhabit our diminished household, to possess the soul of my poor, bewildered mother for the rest of her life, given all that, I am tempted to say that the answer is self evident.

I am tempted, but I say no such thing. It cannot be as simple as that. I think death haunts me because it reveals to me an end that is unlike any other end. The end of the year celebrates the beginning of another. The end of summer brings in the autumn. Each darkness ends in the dawn of a new day. When any game ends, another game is set up, ready and waiting to be played. The end of my life is the ultimate end, there is no new beginning, there is nothing to follow.

I think death haunts me so because I have a strict logical bent and a restless imagination. And since life is dazzling and I still feel capable of achieving almost anything, this daily vision of an ultimate end, badly hurts. And there is not much I can do but cry at nights and suffer the pain during the day.

LIVING -HOW? IN FACE OF MULTIPLE TERRORS, SUCHLIKE?

I do not know. I haven't worked it out. It seems, that unlike the giant born utterly without fear, I shall never be able to bestow them on others nearby, handily placed. It seems, also, that I must beware the queen who has the uncanny foresight, lest I condemn my life to their study and, unwittingly, hasten their still hesitant approach.

And yet I shall have to learn to teach my eyes, when they are looking into the future, to see, and be blind to, the terrors that are waiting to greet me there.

LIFE - WHAT FOR? TO WHAT END BUILD A LIFE WITH INFINITE CARE WHEN IN THE END NOTHING REMAINS?

I have answered six questions. Perhaps not to your expectations, but I have done my level best. As for the last, after my recent perambulations, I have learnt that this is not the best place to try to resolve it here. The light is too pure, there are no shades, there is not enough darkness to see and understand.

The choir of the five officials, in its monochrome voice, responds to my answers with a recital which, in my present predicament, is of no great help.

"We find no fault with your argument. We find no fault with your argument as far as it goes. Of course, it does not go nearly far enough. The seven questions are not disparate. Despite the grammar, despite the words, there is only one question mark, to which, severally and jointly, they all refer. Ultimately there is only one answer, and that single answer is the answer to them all. We suggest you exercise less formal logic and study again the painting, bearing in mind what you have been told, knowing now what you do know."

Still on my knees, I turn my head left and let my eyes, unthinking, roam freely wherever they will. They cover the canvas, moving slowly back and forth between the girl skating on a lake frozen over and the wizened old woman, sweeping away, under skies laden with grief, the yellowing snows of yesteryear. When they stop ranging, my eyes, on their own accord, come to rest on the molten mercury globule emerging from the womb of the naked lady sitting astride a royal throne. They marvel at the fine detail of the images reflected on the glass smooth spherical surface, images which mirror accurately every single thing in the painting, except that each one of them appears now in its opposite sense.

With my eyes trained on the globe, the globe that contains, in reverse, the promise of youth, the desolation of ageing, and the voluptuous beauty enthroned in between, I see, at last, the crucial moment, the moment when the naked, royal, lady gives birth to her own life.

At the same time, I cannot ignore the perception that the painting, as whole, depicts a human eye. The luminous, mirror surfaced globe, stands out clearly as the iris, with the surrounding scenes afloat in a shallow, transparent liquid of reddish blue veins.

But it is the black pupil in the centre of the iris that grabs my attention, it is the black pupil that yields the ultimate clue. Perversely, it reflects nothing and admits only that which is not visible within the painting, that which, in my ignorance, I failed to consider at all.

“The painter is inside the painting, he is still working on the unfinished picture, he has always been there. The picture, although unfinished, is complete, which naturally means the painter as well. Without him there is no work, and the work, after all, is for his own benefit.” The words, spoken by the third official on my first visit, are echoing in my ears. I did not understand their meaning and searched for the painter in vain.

There is only place for the painter to be, to be in the painting and yet never be seen. He must be in the black pupil of the iris, he must occupy the centre of the eye. He must paint in darkness, always working towards the light. Imprisoned there he is doomed to depict a world into which he cannot escape, and so he can never depict himself.

As with all persistent riddles, the solution, once given, is obvious. As with all persistent riddles, the obvious solution is not completely convincing. As with all persistent riddles, there is a hint of a sleight of hand, a trick of words, a deception of some sort being practised by the clever to beguile the gullible.

I do not feel called upon to put into words, for the sake of the officials, my conclusions, such as they are. Now that I know where the painter is hidden, the curious painting makes better sense. At the same time, the limitations imposed on him are difficult to live with, but then so are the strict confines of my own self.

Nobody attempts to detain me, as, a half blessed man, I rise from my knees and walk out of the Cathedral of Light. Even so, I am accosted once more by my shadow, passing under what is for me, the first and the last gothic arch.

“What’s the painting to you anyway, what’s the difference if you do or you don’t get its meaning? Assuming, of course, it has one, which is by no means assured. What matters takes place elsewhere. If you want to find out how well you are doing, if there are any real answers to be had, you’d better go back to where the weighing is done and see the verdict of the scales with your own eyes.”

I do not argue. And so we are, at once, in the meeting place of convergent cords, of swinging men, of whispers swirling around all the points of the compass in a bewildering flow. Mounted on their platforms the recorders still record the whispers and despatch the recordings, as flying paper darts, into the same communal basket. And when the basket is full, its contents are weighed on a pair of scales of the kind employed by apothecaries of old. Scales that are larger than life, capable of weighing an adult man, no matter how heavy his bones. Precise enough to determine his life span, be it ever so short.

The nondescript men, in their sixties, still perform their antics, practically unchanged. Spaced at odd intervals, brushing past the scales, shouting slogans in mid air, they leap on and off the platforms, to keep the recorders attentive and glued to their notes.

Even though occasionally the odd paper dart misses its target, and even though, ever so rarely, a leaper falls, the cycle of weighing never varies, the timing is exact, the pattern still holds. Yet there is something that feels different now. Some of the nondescript men aren't quite nondescript any more. Some appear familiar, as if we've met some place, some time, long ago.

Reading intently the language of their movements, I am led to recall the army of minute figures that followed me, at a set distance, on my way out of the town of my birth. And, being familiar, being roughly my age, it seems likely that at least some of these whispering, leaping, messengers of newsworthy deeds have been with me from the very beginning. They must have accompanied me, from the ancestral home, unnoticed, everywhere I've gone. On my travels to the cemetery of the dead and the dying. On to the heart of the spring. Through the gothic mansions of orderly succession of orders, right to this place, here and now.

Watching their endless procession, now that they are no longer nondescript men, I note that, although the procession is endless, there is no unending supply of men. I note some sort of recurring pattern. At differing intervals, the men keep repeating themselves. Judging by the intervals between each appearance, and by their devoted personal allegiance to me, it is safe to assume, they go back to the place of my formative years. These messengers incessantly, haphazardly must revisit the past and whatever they bring back, the tidings are ancient, the news is old news.

For, surely, nothing of import could have happened in the town of my birth for ages, yet, the mere recounting of incidents best forgotten, tales of things long dead and buried, seems to matter a great deal. For, there is no doubt, their secret whisperings are religiously recorded, the recordings collated, collated and weighed.

And when I look again at the scales, the scales of justice or injustice, as the case may be, I realise that the wild imbalance, which made me suffer so, was something

to do with remembering, without knowing, what happened to someone else, much younger, much more impressionable, at a remote yet familiar place, a long time ago. Remembering, that is, unbeknownst, in cruel waves of unpredictable frequency, what can never be forgot.

And when I look again at the scales, I see to my indescribable relief, that the violent oscillations, so unbearably painful before, are over. Maybe, the tongue in the ornamental head of the scales does not keep always strictly to the middle. Maybe, there is, from time to time, a wavering, a bias, an appreciable swing. Maybe, the balance is not perfect. But the scales are no longer out of true.

My heart no more goes off racing on its own. My breathing is once again quiet, measured, unaware of itself. My appetite has returned, I eat at least one square meal a day. What I eat, I digest. I keep what I need and, without fuss, get rid of the rest.

I am alert in daylight, mercifully asleep at night. Once more I move with ease through seamless layers of repose, from depths to deeper depths of profound tranquillity.

The passage between day and night is no longer fraught, no longer lined with terrors, no longer haunted by menacing apparitions past, present and ones not yet seen. I can even, on occasion, let the day unfold slowly, lazing over half remembered and half projected dreams of intriguing complexity. When traversing it, though, a suspicion of troubles lingers on. There are times when, falling asleep, a single deep shudder convulses my whole body. There are times when, waking up, I wake up, afraid. And there are times when, in the middle of the night an unscheduled nightmare still brings my sleep to a premature close.

My previous stay here taught me that it's useless to try to intervene. The faceless, hominoid figures are mute. They will go on scooping, brushing, piling particles of dust and ignore the scales, my plight, me. The leaping messengers are unstoppable, their movement cannot be distracted, whatever I do. The recorders will carry on listening, scribbling and throwing paper darts, oblivious to all. And, of course, it all hangs together, there is no one in charge, no one to hear a final appeal.

All I can do at this juncture, is to admire the intricate workings, to marvel at the exquisite timing, and feel grateful for the recovered balance, imperfect as it is.

For the rest, I pray that my journey to my birthplace will be taken into consideration, that my return there will not have been completely in vain. I pray that the messengers returning from the capital of that unrecognised state, will keep on bringing news of my recent journey. News of my search for lost friends, my revisiting neglected relations. News of my laborious excavations and of my efforts to settle unfinished business. Business in hidden files, left with missing persons, in a town that has gone to seed but is, otherwise, unchanged.

I can only hope that the news will be received here with favour and weighed against what I've neglected, did not disclose, failed to accomplish, never even attempted to do. I can only hope that, in consequence, the balance will keep, and, perhaps, may even be restored to its state of original perfection.

And with that hope in my heart I leave the scales and descend to the ice cold mountain lake where I first learnt to be utterly alone.

When, on my way up, I last looked into its mirrorsmooth surface, the face staring back at me was a face in a shocking state of accelerated transformation. The eyes, in particular, were given to bewildering gyrations, one instant looking into a visionary distance, with all things still possible, the next, staring in blind panic at terrors they, hard as they tried, could never behold.

Standing on that forsaken shore, I hesitate. The face, the last time I saw it, dissolved slowly into a transparent, watery grave. Will it reappear again if I kneel and bend over the lake? Much has happened since then, I feel I am not altogether the man I was. Still, it is quite possible its lines were too firmly drawn for the face to have undergone any significant change.

Despite grave doubts, the temptation to glance at my reflection prevails. The face in the lake, thank god, is not the same face. True, the skin on the cheeks has fallen further away from the bone, its texture is even more leathery, but the eyes, and that's what matters now, the eyes are not wild. They do not gyrate, they are no longer in disarray. Suspicious, searching, inquisitive, they still show signs of apprehension, but now these weary eyes look straight back at me. Look straight back, and do not flinch.

Thus reassured, I survey this desolate landscape where I suffered the darkest night of my life. Alienated even from my own body, yet sensing every shade of its infinite pain, I was left alone with my panic and the panic was me. The ground on which I now stand is the same ground on which, I learnt, sleepless, that there was a world out there to which I belonged but which did not belong to me. For, somewhere at the dawn of my personal history, the world and I had got separated and all I was left of the world, on that terrible night, was this ground, marking its outer boundary.

It is broad daylight now, and I do not wish to tempt fates by risking another night in this god forsaken place. From what I can see, there are no living creatures about, no distinctive vegetation, no ageless rocks in an unusual formation to comfort a tired eye. The wind is dead, and in the absence of sound, I listen to a silence that no longer threatens me.

I could not be more alone. I am waiting for the gathering of ill defined, ominous sights. I am waiting for menacing, unexpected whispers. I am waiting for the smell of decay to assail my nose. I am waiting for omens of danger, for the familiar portents of a self inflicted catastrophe. I am waiting for the panic. And the panic does not come.

But waiting in that forlorn place, I now find myself company. The company of the little boy I have left behind in the town of my birth. The dragonfly from the heart of the spring. The painting exhibited in the Cathedral of Light. Chosen friends, loyal and true, engaged, at a dignified distance, on quests of their own. And other such close attachments that enable me to survive, even when utterly alone.

Lower down the slope, traversing now a heavily forested mountainside, strains of a nursery song come wafting through the trees. The song is about the little boy who, stick in hand and hat on head, went out alone into the big, wide world. And about his mother who cried bitterly and prayed for his safe and quick return. It is the same brutally simple song I heard on my way up, and the voice singing it, is the same voice.

She is still there in that clearing, among the broad chestnut trees covered in leaves of dying autumn colours. She is still naked, her hair is still black and the breasts are firm, ample and still full of milky promise.

She does not recognise me, doesn't realise I have passed through here once before. She accords me the familiarity she will accord to any passer by. She keeps insisting that there is no way through, that it's useless trying. She repeats her dire warnings of what happens to those who dare defy the odds, those foolish enough to embark on the climb, to attempt the search.

I am invited again to stay in her warm embrace, to stay in the love of the here, in the comfort of the now. And, of course, all the while, inside fat, green, thorny shells, hundreds of gleaming chestnuts are to be discovered in their moist twin beds.

Looking into those sad, black, appealing eyes, I tell her, as gently and as softly as my harsh voice will allow, I tell her, I cannot stay. I have lost forever the excitement of breaking open a shell. I've long forgotten the pleasure of holding a new found chestnut in the palm of my hand. And the uninhibited pleasure of hoarding, playing, competing, is simply no longer there.

I tell her my climbing days are over. The search is at its end. I have been up there, I have returned. I am still, just about, in one piece. Now I am on my way back. I tell her all that, in many different, plain, undecorated words. It's no use. She doesn't listen. She cannot understand.

Thus, sadly, but without regret, I take my leave. I know I will never come by here again, I know it is the last I see of her in my, twisting, convoluted life.

Almost out of the woods, I find the last traces of the narrow, neglected path that I lost on my ascent. Right here, where I saw a man of short stature and monumental presence engraved on a granite rock, as I looked up but did not foresee what lay ahead. The man is still here. I well remember how he urged me then to do it all on my own, without any help. How he pronounced as worthless, everything else. The man is now mute.

I do not know whether he is still capable of human intercourse, whether he has the power of comprehension, whether he has retained some vestigial interest in me. Even so, I have decided to tell him what is on my mind.

“I must thank you for your kind, encouraging words. I am deeply indebted for making your life a living example of how I should live mine. Above all, I feel a profound gratitude for what you have given me of you, yourself.

For my part, a rebellious yet loyal pupil, I have done my best to follow the example set. I have done more than is in my power, to keep you alive as long as I have. You are due most of the credit of what little I have achieved thus far in a life devoted to your ends.

Even so, after all this time, I confess I now know for sure that I cannot do it all on my own. I know I depend on others. I know that beyond my own solitary achievements, there is, in the world, much of infinitely greater worth. I know that love, if well practised, is another kind of freedom, even though, at times, it destroys the freedom to act.”

With these words I leave the scene, without waiting to see if they’ve made any impression on the granite faced man. I leave the scene and continue my descent on the precipitous path which widens eventually into a well worn track.

On the track I pass the casualty department of an emergency ward that marked the last human outpost on the way up. The place with no surgeons but with an interminable row of confessional booths, supplied with couches and acutely listening ears, ears attached to gravely nodding heads of disinterested men who, with eyes averted, take nebulous notes in an illegible hand. I hear, in passing, the lopsided parley between confessor and patient meander on its endless way. It’s of no interest to me since I know that to conclude successfully such an affair, a partnership won’t do. You have to bring it to an end, alone, yourself.

On the lower slope of the mountain, when the track becomes a road, I come upon the field of grey human statues, statues that have been sitting in the same semi-lotus position for an impatient number of years. On my climb, I spent some time here, concentrating on nothing, keeping completely still. I have no way of telling if any one among them, managed, in my absence, to defy gravity, to soar up the peak.

But I well remember the warning delivered by their guru whilst leaning on a protruding rock. He said that, at the mountain top, the air is too rarefied. That, the view from there is blinding and divine. That, the absence of mankind is all important and makes no difference. That, on reaching the summit, the burden carried throughout a lifetime becomes unbearable.

He said all that, and in all that he said, he proved right. But he was wrong on one count. He said that, in climbing, you cannot reach the mountain’s top. I know it is not true because I did precisely that.

Going on down, the track widens, and although rough, it may now be termed, a road. I bypass the consultants who offered, and I see, still offer, a hypnotic shortcut to the summit in exchange for a surrender of the self. It is a deal I've always suspected. Now I know it is a fraud.

Further on, as the slope becomes more gentle, I ignore the sight of the would be assistants who tempted me shortly after I had set out on this road. The circus artists of the East, contorting their bodies into unlikely forms, breathing deep and letting the air long resonate their vocal cords. The high priestesses of oily substance and essential scent. The nuns of the Manipulating Order of Latter-day Saints, sitting on three legged milking stools, massaging the feet of climbers who find it too difficult to climb. I paid little enough attention to them at the time, I have nothing to do with them now.

The road is almost level, well travelled and generously broad. I am, more or less, where I have started from. Crowds of people, moving in the opposite direction, jostle past me at the beginning of their climb. They all carry a highly specific personal pain, and in their eyes, as they pass, I see the questions they all are afraid to ask.

I would like to tell them what it was like. But I do not know how. I would like to tell them what it was like. But I don't think they'll believe it, and even if they did, it would not help. The answers to some questions, each one of us, has to suffer for himself.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE STRANGER

Without asking leave, without introducing himself, he came and sat next to me. An undistinguished man. The kind of man you frequently meet and when asked by the police for a description, you simply cannot recall any of his features. Not the style of his hair, not the colour of the eyes, not the shape of the nose, no age, no height, no distinguishing marks whatsoever.

His voice is humdrum, his conversation has no real beginning. He talks to me casually, as if picking up the thread of a long standing dialogue. A dialogue which, due to other priorities, is constantly being interrupted.

“How is the throat today? Still a little dry, still slightly irritating from time to time?”

I do not answer. Not in the least discouraged by my silence, the man carries on talking. He just implies the absent reply.

“All well, I see. Just a minuscule sensation at the back, very, very occasionally. How fortunate. Of course, it may come back. It mostly does, you know. And when it comes back, it’s always worse. Not obviously, not at once. You’d hardly notice the change, but the dryness will become more pronounced, the irritation more frequent, and then, eventually, the cough will make its customary appearance.

Funny little cough that. Harmless. Innocent. But very, very persistent. It tends to develop into something of a habit. An annoying habit. A habit, like having to clear the throat before making any pronouncement or like a polite, gentle croak to indicate that you require silence because there are a few words that need be said.

And it may never amount to more than that. Something you get used to. Something you learn to live with. Something you keep doing, without even being aware of doing it. Or, it may get worse. From one or two occasional, well practised hacks, it may grow into fits of coughing you cannot control, cannot bring to an end.”

I dislike the man, I find distasteful the assumed intimacy in the tone of his voice. I am filled with unease at the drift of his words. Looking away into the distance, I put on an impassive face. I mean to convey to the stranger the impression that I have no interest in what he has to say. That I wish him to go away. He takes note of my gesture, but my gesture does not have the desired effect.

“There are other topics, of course, we could discuss, god knows there is no shortage of them, but I should have thought, just now, this business of the throat is what interests you most. Am I not right?”

The business of the throat, as he calls it, does not interest me. On the contrary, it bores me to sobs. A certain dryness, a scratchiness at the back of the throat, has been coming and going for quite a while. Just when I think it's gone for good, it reappears. But it doesn't turn into a regular sore throat. It doesn't lead to a nasty cold. It just disappears. And then it's back again. Again and again. And this, I admit, worries me.

“So you might as well go on to explore the possibilities. Where were we? Oh yes, the persistent fits of coughing. Well now, what next? You may, after a while, become aware of swallowing. No difficulty, you understand, at least not at first, just an awareness of an act that has gone humbly unnoticed before. Especially when the food is chunky. Also, funnily enough, when there is nothing to swallow and you keep swallowing all the same.

This in itself may not bother you, but even so, you are likely to notice a bias in the stuff you tend to eat. You'll find you are more partial to mashed potatoes, more mince, more food reduced to a pulp. You will tend to avoid meat that needs a bite, anything that wants chewing. Who knows, you may even turn into a late vegetarian before the end of your life.”

I resent the man, resent his intrusion, resent being the subject of an idle speculation that may become less idle as time goes on. I want to stop him talking, since, obviously, he has no intention of leaving the place. To erect a barrier between us, I open wide my daily paper and immerse myself into the dramatic events of a sensational world. Now he cannot see me. Unfortunately, I can still hear distinctly his unpleasant voice.

“Being aware of swallowing is usually a sign of some sort of restriction in that area. Perhaps a small little growth of some kind...”

A word I dread. It wasn't always so. On the contrary. It used to feel good to hear of growth, in the days when I was impatient to grow up and saw the astonishment in the eyes of aunts at family reunions. I used to watch with pleasure and pride the growing muscles of my legs, and strands of hair begin to populate a boyish chest.

“Later on, if swallowing becomes inconvenient, you will want to consult the medical profession. After all, the growth may be benign, and to remove it, no trouble at all. Coming to think of it, why wait? Why not make an appointment now? You have nothing to lose. If there is no growth, you will gain peace of mind. If the obstruction is benign, a surgeon will remove it in a trice. If it is malign isn't it better to know exactly where you stand. After all, an early detection could make all the difference.”

Hang on. Just a minute. You are way out of line. How did we get suddenly to cancer, starting from something less than a sore throat? I am not at all keen to involve in

my life the medical profession. I won't call a doctor to examine every niggles, every twinge, every suspicion of pain.

"The trouble with waiting is that you are taking a chance. In waiting, you have the impression that nothing much happens whilst you wait. You have the feeling that everything is awaiting your decision. It isn't so. Do you remember how you used to postpone seeing the dentist, whilst your teeth continued gently to rot away? Only we are not talking about teeth here. Teeth, after all is said and done, can be replaced. Just imagine how upset you'll be if, some way further down the road, you are forced to seek a second opinion and the consultant says that he is sorry but it is far too late."

Lines of newsprint run together in front of my eyes, the text is no longer legible. I visualise the aforementioned individual seated comfortably in his consulting room. On the desk between us, an open file of notes, observations and results of anxious tests carried out on blood, tissue and bone. With a face expressing the right degree of professional concern, he tells me that had I come to him earlier, an operation would have had a reasonable chance of success. As it is, nothing can be done. Nothing, that is, to remove surgically the growth. A great deal of help will, of course, be available to retard the deadly process, to gain a little time, to reduce the pain. The insinuating voice of the stranger changes the scene.

"I have known men reduced to a hoarse whisper, fed liquid nourishment through a tube, and carry on like that for years and years. But, I ask you, what sort of life is that?"

I find my hands, having dropped the daily paper, are now meandering all over my throat. They are groping to feel a swelling I hope to god is not there.

The stranger gets up and, without any formalities, takes his leave. As events, obligations and people come crowding back into my life, my view is obscured and I lose sight of him. The occasional scratchiness in the throat, touch wood, is gone. Nothing sinister has developed there. I never, now, give it a second thought.

Between games, in a natural break, whilst taking a drink of water, I suddenly see the man again, standing right next to me. I recognise his undistinguished appearance. His humdrum voice is just the same. His conversation is casual, picking up the one sided dialogue, more or less, from where he left off.

"I must say you are brave. I mean, the way you put up with the pain and keep on playing the game. I know it's only a dull ache and it's intermittent, but it has been with you... how long? Two, may be, three years? And it is not showing any signs of getting better, on the contrary..."

It has nothing to do with bravery. When playing I don't feel a thing. The pain, if you can call it that, comes much later. At night or in the morning when I lie, unthinking, in my bed. It is dull, it has some numbness to it, it feels as if my right leg is trapped, below the knee, in shifting sands.

“It is a strange sort of pain. Difficult to decide where it is. In the muscle, in a ligament, in the bone? Or, perhaps, it is an artery or a vein? Something wrong with the circulation, who knows...”

I don't know. And I am not so keen to find out. I don't even want to talk about it. Talking about it constitutes an admission that it's for real. I cannot deny it altogether, but so far I have granted it only a shadowy existence. Treated it as if it isn't there.

“If it's something to do with the circulation, and I am not saying it is, it should be looked at without delay. I don't have to spell out for you what a blockage could mean. Surely, you have not forgotten what happened to your father. That was a very narrow escape. I don't like that hint of numbness and, by the way, have you not noticed how, nowadays, late in the evening, your feet tend to swell.”

Of course, I have noticed. It's a relief sometimes to take off my shoes. But it's only bad after I have been sitting solidly for hours and when it's really hot. And anyway, I am told that at my age that's nothing unusual, lots of others experience much the same.

“Ah, your age... I knew, sooner or later, your age would come into it. But then it's precisely because of your age that you can no longer afford to overlook such tell tale signs as these. An amputation, you know, is a messy business. It takes a long time to recover from it. Even longer to adjust to the loss of a leg, especially the right leg. It has been a pride and joy to you, hasn't it, that leg. Served you bravely right through a lifetime... a lifetime of intensely fought, passionate games.”

Standing at the side of the playing surface, a bottle of water in my hand, I see an invalid. He is on crutches. Instead of a limb, an empty trouser leg is neatly folded and pinned up between waist and knee. A game is on. He is not playing. He is merely watching others play. From time to time, at particularly exciting moments, the missing leg has an itch, an itch to run, to jump, to kick.

“Trouble with circulation is that it's not always confined to just one place. It may turn out to be more serious than a little local difficulty. The effects may go well beyond the leg. Once veins start losing their elasticity, the whole network is at risk. If there is a progressive narrowing of the arteries, trouble could occur virtually anywhere. It's lucky, in a way, that you noticed things going wrong in the periphery. It could so easily have been much nearer the heart.”

Fortunately, the game resumes. With the stranger among the spectators it takes a little time to settle my nerves. Even with the ball in play I cannot help glancing in his direction, hoping to find him not there. At the end of the game I dive into a communal bath reserved for players. I relax, strangers are definitely out.

The dull ache below my right knee does not get any worse. Nor does it get better. I feel it mostly, lying in bed, on my way to sleep. I have no further conversation with

the stranger on the subject, although I see him distantly, in passing, from time to time.

I am thankful, quite frankly, that he does not come closer, does not keep on inquiring after the state of my health. His inquiries are not really helpful, and even though polite, I am not sure their object is my continued well being.

I am unhappy therefore, but hardly surprised, to find him comfortably seated on a leather armchair across my desk, when I pause to review my work. The stranger does not bother to change his manner, or alter his tone of voice, although it is the first time he has come, uninvited, into my home.

"I came to see you because I am concerned. You have, so far, taken no medical advice. Common sense indicates, at the very least, a visit to your local GP. My recommendation went beyond that. We know you instinctively dislike doctors, we know you are suspicious of tests, we know you have an absolute horror of hospitals, but even so, don't you think this is taking fear a little too far?

Or, perhaps, it is not fear at all. Perhaps you forgot. It simply slipped your mind. It wouldn't be the first time you didn't remember to make an appointment and, I dare say, it won't be the last. Remembering isn't exactly your strongest suit. Never was..."

True. To be fair though, I am good at recognising smells, places and never forget a face. Also, I remember my promises. It is arbitrary signs and symbols, I find difficult to hold in splendid isolation in my head. I suppose it requires patience, discipline and a sort of reverence to enshrine received wisdom just exactly as it is supplied. I have too little of all that. Once I get hold of something new, I tend to play with it. To twist, distort it out of shape and try to blend it with other bits and pieces previously retained. Occasionally something emerges, something worthwhile to keep.

"But then, perhaps, your memory isn't quite what it was. The change is so gradual, the differences so subtle, it is hard to judge. And then no two days are the same. One day you have no difficulty at all, the next, for the life of you, you cannot recall the name of one of your oldest friends."

Such lapses are nothing new. They have been with me all my life. And they are not that special, I know lots of people who suffer such lapses all the time. Names in any case are notorious. The same name can apply to many individuals and fit none of them. Only the very few succeed in fashioning a memorable name. For the rest, if we remember them at all, it is for our like or dislike, for a quirky feature of body or face, for a touching event we once shared. Seldom do we remember them for their name.

"This isn't just about names, although in this context, names are highly significant. With a name you cannot prevaricate. You either remember it or you do not. You cannot intuit it, or deduce it, or make it up from fragments of memory that are left.

Therefore names are a simple measure of your ability to recall. And in such cases, this is the first faculty to fail.

At any rate that's how it was with your mother... and a couple of uncles too... Of course, nobody paid much attention at first, why should they, she was thought to be a bit absent minded. Misplacing belongings, mistaking numbers, not finding an obvious word, losing the thread in mid-sentence, leaving behind things that really matter, one and all are lumped together. Being absent minded in old age covers many sins.

And appropriate too. For the mind is absent. What remains in question is just how absent. A brief lapse of no great moment. Or the first few of unpleasant abscondings which will become more frequent and culminate in the ultimate rift."

The stranger leans back, looks me in the eye and falls silent to let the import of his words sink in. I avert my eyes. I shuffle some of the papers on the desk. I lift my right hand to my forehead. I rub the temples. I close my eyes. I shield the closed lids. What more can I do?

Look him in the eye, return his gaze, challenge him, ask him firmly to leave? Plead weariness, make up some plausible excuse, explain my delicate situation, hope he'll show some understanding and quietly disappear? Walk out and pray that on my return I won't find him here? I don't do any of it, I just sit there and let it all happen to me.

"It's just a nuisance at first, then an irritation. Later it becomes something of a frustration which gives rise to a vague concern. When you cannot hold an idea in your head long enough to write it down, when you cannot recall most of what you did the previous day, it starts to be serious. From then on you can confidently expect to lose slowly all the brilliance you've ever had. If it ever comes to that, you'll probably put up a desperate fight before regressing into some kind of vegetable. We don't need to go into unpleasant details, after all you have lived through it already once. I am sure you could not have not forgotten the terminal years of your mother's life."

She reappears, sitting up on the mattress of a hospital cot, framed in the state I left her for the very last time. Withering remnants of whitish dull hair, saliva dripping from the corners of a sagging, tooth forsaken mouth, eyes turned towards me, alive but bereft of recognition, fingers half reaching out with no desire left in them to grip, to hold, to stroke a once fiercely loved son.

"You can't help it, it's all to do with genes. The chances are fifty-fifty, you may be lucky and take after your father. In any case, it may never come to that. Something sudden, unexpected might intervene at any time and cut short the whole affair."

My mother fades, lingers awhile, then dies away. The stranger gives the subtle impression that he knows more than he is willing to say. A kind of smug, self

deprecating smile on his twisted lips seems to imply that we are not just talking about some far fetched theoretical possibilities. He has something specific, quite imminent, in view and obviously wants to make me ask a question which would trigger other torments, other unbearable alternatives. I am not to be tempted. Shrinking back into myself, I watch, with a profound sense of relief, the unwelcome stranger disappear.

After his departure, I find myself engaged, perhaps more intensely, in a wide variety of works. The fine detail of these absorbing activities permits no time for leisure, no time for reflection. Abroad, I prefer, if at all possible, to be in the company of other men. At home, I am careful in shutting windows, locking doors. I also keep, somewhere in the house, at least one light burning throughout the night. His absence, increasingly with every passing day, keeps my spirits up. Yet I can't help feeling the stranger is never far away.

The platform, at the time of day I am wont to take the train, is usually near deserted. The few waiting individuals are well spaced out, each one standing behind the prominent red line, warning passengers to stay well clear of the edge.

The train, almost on time, is announced but not yet in view. My eyes are aligned on the receding tracks which come to a point, a point from which the train will first grow into a thin line and then a thundering monster tolerating nothing in its way.

As the train pulls into the station, with the engine close to where I stand, a sudden violent push in my back propels me forward. Almost at the same time, just as I am about to fall over the edge, right into the path of the slowing engine, two powerful arms grab my shoulders and pull my body forcibly back. Back from the passing mass of iron, back to safety, back behind the warning red line.

The arms are the arms of the stranger. He is unabashed. He must have been standing behind me for quite some time. The shiver of fear has gone right through me. My breath is back, my heart stopped pounding, as I listen, incredulous, to his everyday, ordinary voice.

"It gave you quite a turn, didn't it? It's such an old trick, but it still works every time. I expect you haven't come across it much since school. Of course, it was a bit overdone in those days... almost at every opportunity... in front of horse, coach, tram... no matter what came charging past, so long as the victim was daydreaming... and facing the right way. What's clever about the trick is that the fright and relief are almost simultaneous. The instant of terror and the grateful escape are within touching distance. Which makes the shame of confessing to the shiver of fear all the greater.

But you don't any more mind admitting that you are scared, do you? What's the point of denying something so obvious?

But never mind the cheap little trick, isn't there something to be said for such a simple, sudden ending. Just one single moment of resolve, just one single wild,

reckless act, and it's all over. True, there is the mess, but that's for afters. No longer your concern.

Hasn't the time come perhaps to consider what's left. Are things going to get better, are they going to stay the same, or, what's more likely, get gradually worse. A man so given to logic, you must have been thinking, probably for years, along these lines. The idea doesn't come to you, surely, as a surprise."

No, it's definitely not that. It is hardly a surprise. The choice of ending one's own life has fascinated me from early on. I remember being ridiculously passionate about it at school. The subject stayed close to my heart ever since. Suicide appeared to me then as the only possible act which truly asserted the existence of a free will. The spontaneous denial of a preordained sequence, a set pattern, a determined time span. A defiance of god, of nature, of genes. A clean, dramatic rupture, an altogether heroic act. And, as with so many an heroic act, its attraction lies in the infinite possibilities of a judicious postponement. An act contemplated now but planted somewhere in the safety of a vague future. To be accomplished in the far, receding distance.

"I don't want to sound alarmist, but the chances of a prolonged end game being pleasant aren't particularly good. With a bit of luck you might get away cheaply, but the odds are against it. More likely than not, the end will be a messy end. The trouble is, the worse it gets, the weaker the will, the will to end it all yourself.

I do not think my will was ever strong enough to put an end to its own self. For such a demanding task it would always have needed an ally. An ally much more formidable than a mere academic doubt. Perhaps a profound despair. Perhaps a kind of violent pain that cannot be borne. A despair still to come. A pain that still awaits.

If the intention of the stranger was to tempt me into doing something irrevocably rash, he has not succeeded. On the contrary, I go about my business with renewed enterprise, my affairs are on the up, the general state of my health leaves little to be desired. There is an intensity in my work, a sense of urgency that wasn't there before.

The stranger keeps away. At least, I do not spot him anywhere on the hurried rounds of my daily activities. I want nothing to do with him, I want him banished from my life. But his absence, paradoxically, is not, to me, a source of wonderful relief. This is because I can't help feeling that, though absent, the stranger is never far away.

Whenever I stop, hesitate, turn back, or lift my eyes, I expect to see his unwelcome figure looming up. And when I find that figure missing from the prevailing scene, I breathe a sigh of short lived respite, respite tinged with shades of disbelief. Each non-sighting at once reassures, adds to my discomfort and raises fresh speculation about his whereabouts. I begin to feel he is almost never where he ought to be. The stranger's absence becomes, more and more, a source of floating, groundless, anxiety.

The few meetings we have had, have been thoroughly unpleasant. They have left behind lasting disturbances. But the stranger's menacing absence has made the situation worse. Lurking somewhere unseen in the ambit of my private world, I cannot follow his movements, I have no way of knowing when and where he will accost me next.

I have become noticeably nervous as a result. I keep interrupting myself. I have lost the rhythm of my movement. I do not flow. I often catch myself turning my head, looking over my shoulder, surveying in consternation a landscape full of terminal possibilities. I find it difficult to concentrate. I am distracted by the most marginal irrelevancy. I am off on any number of unlikely tangents so long as they take me away from the business in hand.

All the time I know the stranger is close by. Sooner or later, I am convinced, he'll turn up. And when he does, he will tease, and poke, and prod, and pry. He will open up old wounds. He will touch raw nerves. He will resume from where he left off, talking to me on the same familiar terms on the sole subject that interests him. And I shan't be able to change the topic, or halt the stride of his words, or close against them my all too impressionable ears. I shall just have to listen. And suffer. And think.

The continued absence of the stranger is perverse. Tension mounts. Waiting consumes most of my attention. I get into a state. Then comes the fearful admission: I'd rather have him here, with me, in front of my eyes, than await in constant suspense his unpredictable, sinister call.

After the fearful admission, as if in answer to my involuntary summons, the stranger does finally appear. He comes not with a triumphant smile on his ashen lips. No trace of a smug expression on the customary features of his impassive face.

The occasion of his reappearance is unnoteworthy, except for a new kind of pain I am experiencing of late in the left side of my brain. Its location is imprecise. Somewhere behind the temple and above the ear, well inside the skull. Its nature, hard to describe. Something like a throb, a spasm, a stab but not quite any one of these. It's not there all the time and never there for long.

This new pain brings to mind my grandfather. He who suffered from high blood pressure and died of a stroke. An artery on the left side of his brain ruptured. Killed him in seven days.

I expect the stranger to comment. To begin elaborating on the new found symptom as a portent of some serious disease. To speculate on malignant implications that may prove fatal. But there is not a word. The stranger, this time, is silent. He is present, observing, and quite mute.

This lack of verbal intercourse, for some reason, I find peculiarly disconcerting. Perhaps, because, over the course of my long life, I have learnt to cope with words

better than with other realities. Even at their harshest, at their most dangerous, they have a redeeming quality. They can be played with, they can be opposed, reformed, and utterly transcended by other words. Only seldom are they final, deadly, signifying the end of the world.

Eventually, the stranger absents himself. But not for long. His return brings with it, by coincidence, a buzzing in my right ear. In my innocence, at first, I seek an outside source for the sound. A wireless left switched on, long after the station ceased to transmit. Or, an insect trapped indoors, lamenting her mating season pass by. I find no such plausible source and am forced to accept that the sound has no external source. That what I hear I cannot share with anyone, that what I hear is inside my head, a private joke meant for me alone.

All this time, whilst, self-enclosed, I suffer the buzzing in my ear, the stranger sits in absolute silence. A silence, I appear to have lost. Yet the buzzing does, unexpectedly, come to a stop. But then, just as unexpectedly, it resumes its tormenting course. It comes and goes as it pleases, tracking a timetable incompatible with my own.

And whenever I am forced to listen to this high pitched, meaningless whine, I am conscious of the stranger watching me, without saying a solitary word. Which is more disturbing than if he simply drew attention to the dying cells of my inner ear or expatiated on the likely rate of decline of all my mental faculties.

It's hard for me to ignore the intermittent buzzing in the ear, harder still to reconcile myself to the unremitting visitations of a foreboding stranger who says nothing but always implies the worst. For, obviously, he does not restrict himself to headaches and funny noises in the inner ear. He now regularly accompanies the nebulous pain below the knee, the dryness in the throat, any lapses of concentration, of memory, the slightest irregularity in the urinary flow, any bile that seeps into the alimentary canal, the passing of kidney stones no matter how small, fleeting constrictions in the chest, and all the rest of it. Any half suspicious sensation remarked by an ageing body, whether old or subtly new, brings his compelling presence into my sombre view.

An ache, a niggle, a tremor in the heart, and the stranger is there, saying nothing. I take it, he believes his mere presence is enough. And he is right. His presence is more than enough. Enough to undermine a life, hitherto in fine working order, an order established over six decades of ambition, habit, greed, and endless, untiring graft.

In the daytime, this presence impairs my overall performance. I find it hard to discharge the many duties I have negligently accumulated over the years. In the evenings, it keeps me from taking my customary repose and sours the events devised for my own personal entertainment. At nights, it severely curtails my sleep and fills its meagre rations with dreams of a monstrous significance.

Being unable to rid myself of the stranger, incapable of getting on with living my life, as always in the last resort, I experiment. I keep on working but with my eyes shut. I try to look straight through him and discover things behind him, on the other side. By sheer willpower I try to blot him out of sight. As the stranger is mute, I turn him into a statue, a statue that moves, though ossified. I attempt to make him part of the customary scenery, without any special status, with no import, with no relevance. I pretend that he is no stranger, that he is a vague acquaintance. Perhaps a friend of long standing, perhaps a forgotten relation come back to claim a kinship for the sake of some great inheritance.

I try these tricks and, being desperate, many others still. I try them all to no avail. The stranger keeps returning and, with him, so do my ills. He is never really far away. His silent presence makes life impossible for me.

I have no choice. I must beg him to break his silence. I shall have to ask the stranger to speak to me. To reveal what I so dread to hear.

As usual, he shows no signs of surprise. The intense struggle with myself, that has been going on for years and took such a heavy toll of my sanity, he takes in his stride. My approach to him has, of course, been well anticipated. My request, always expected. My capitulation, taken for granted. The stranger's words, addressed to me, at first, concern mostly himself.

"It is not often I have the opportunity to have a quiet, sensible talk with someone of your intelligence, your academic bent. I don't want you to think that I am complaining, we all have our jobs to do, but the fact of the matter is that men, nowadays, do not hold me in high regard.

That they do not like to meet me, I accept. They never did, they never will. That they are afraid of me, can't be helped. But there is a lack of respect these days, a lack of respect which, I confess, makes me sad.

Sure, everything is changing, and change itself is accelerating fast. Nobody is more aware of that than I. We cannot go back to the good old days. A skeleton carrying an hour glass and a scythe would look slightly ridiculous in a technological age. Believe me, I do realise that. Still, the old rig had a lot going for it. So wonderfully recognisable, so immediate, so simple, so easy for people to grasp.

The scythe, a beautiful implement, with a generous sweeping movement as it cuts clean off what is in its path. The hour glass, with the fine sand, running, running, measuring in calm, even terms, grain by grain, the ebbing away of life. And the skeleton approaching, coming towards you, to signify that bones will be all that's left of what was once a rich, important, complicated life.

It inspired fear. It inspired awe. It also brought some comfort. At least, every man knew who I was. They all had someone to address. Someone to try to cheat. Someone to hide from. Someone to bargain with about the date of the final appointment.

In that guise, I was a respected figure. Omnipresent in church and home. Traced in pigment, ink, in print, painted on wall, scribed on vellum, cut into wood. Recognised, for what I was, for what I am, by the general public, throughout the world.

Recognition, recognition that's what it was. It was recognition that gave me satisfaction and it was recognition that brought comfort for everyone else. For recognition gives you a chance to greet an old enemy, as a reluctant friend.

It may have been old fashioned, over dramatised, but it did work and it's a great shame it cannot be used any more.

And what is there in its place? Not much. Today, it has become all impersonal. I am given no form, no shape, no body, no face. I am no longer received in good society. My name is banished from polite conversation. I have been relegated, reduced to a mere taboo. People no longer die, they just pass away. There are no death agonies, morphine has taken their place. Is it any wonder that I am no longer recognised?

Of course, to someone of your turn of mind, in the habit of harking back to first principles, in what guise I happen to be perceived is but a historical accident. A matter of mere appearances. You have always been impressed by the inevitability of the meeting, the finality of the appointment. Just how and where, you have tended to dismiss as a matter of no great significance.

Come, do not protest, you know it's true. At least it was until so very recently. You see, for me, these meetings are everything. How I appear, how I am seen, how the meeting actually turns out, does matter, matters a great deal. And I find the current climate of shapeless anonymity, this age of shifting, uncertain identities, both personally and professionally, unsatisfactory.

That is why it's such a relief to be able to sit down, at leisure, to discuss with someone sober, in full possession of his faculties, issues outstanding before the end. There are always things to sort out at such times, they shouldn't be done in a last minute rush.

You have no idea how rare it is to be invited, in good time, to such a meeting. Even those few who, in their extreme pain, pray to hasten my arrival, prefer to avoid a personal encounter. As for the rest, it's mostly a dismal, unedifying tale.

There are, as always, exceptions. But, on the whole, at the slightest sign of my presence, people run. They don't want to turn back, to look, to listen. They just run, and run, and keep running. Heedless, headless, terrified.

They don't know which way to face, which way turn, which way to run. Not that it matters, for wherever they run, they can never run away from me. Still, it means I have got to go after them. I have to follow the convoluted path of their panic stricken flight, I've got to track down their pathetic hiding places, I've got to stand by and watch their endless struggles until, thankfully, exhaustion sets in. I am not very patient at the best of times, to linger and wait is tiresome and so unnecessary.

Much of my time, these days, is spent visiting interminable hospital wards. I don't know about you, but I find the distinct smell of these places, particularly offensive. It is composed of an overpowering cocktail of disinfectants designed deliberately to delay me. The staff are hostile, dedicated as they are to keep everyone, at any cost, late for their scheduled appointment.

But the worst of it is the poor quality of the human material. Over the years I have noticed the intake get gradually, imperceptibly, older. They tend to be more frail, more feeble, more in need of assistance. They can do virtually nothing for themselves, they are pumped full of dubious chemicals, and for what? To frustrate me, to impede my work, and so that when I do finally get to them, they should be spared seeing me.

It happens again and again. After waiting unduly long, I am looking forward to what is, after all, meant to be a solemn occasion and when I get there what do I find? A man doped, all woozy, his eyes half blind, his disjointed thoughts meandering all over the place, a man who makes no sense and is, anyway, past caring. Is it fair? I ask you, a reasonable man, can I be expected, in such circumstance, to do justice to myself?"

Put like that, I must admit he has a point. In the momentary pause of the flow of his words I suddenly realise that, talking to me so openly about himself, the stranger succeeded in drawing me a little towards him. He hasn't exactly gained my sympathy but I find I cannot deny him some measure of understanding. In alluding to his sinister profession, the stranger does not really shock me. Given the furtive manner of his appearances, over the period of our unhappy acquaintance, I've come to suspect something akin to that. As he sits opposite me, apostrophising, the menace I now face is more defined, more acute, and yet, oddly, I find it more supportable. For the menace is laced with a sense of curiosity, a curiosity which emanates not from him but from somewhere deep within myself.

"I do not mind so much when I have to call, without previous warning, in the middle of the night. It is not very interesting but at least it's quick, clean and there's no fuss. Of course the meeting has no substance, and with the man asleep, the occasion loses all import. Still, funnily enough, that is the popular choice. That's how people want to go, that's what they pray for, this is exactly the kind of appointment they most request.

Naturally, it doesn't work out quite like that. At least, not often. And I wouldn't be in favour of having too many such endings. It is economical, it makes my work easy, but I feel the price paid is too high. We lose too much.

You see, without me, life lacks meaning. With no deadline in sight there is just an existence which meanders on and slowly stagnates into a morass of futile pains and decaying pleasures. There is no incentive to achieve anything of lasting value, no urgency to realise any of the hopeful dreams you have once so bravely embraced.

I have been close to you from very early on. You wouldn't remember but I kept vigil on many hospital nights during that feverish, sultry summer, with you barely four years old. Your parents, your doctors, your nurses busied themselves at one side of the bed, whilst I stood, in anticipation, on the other.

And, later on, at puberty, at the railway siding, where unnatural selections wiped out half a race and mutated three generations, I was there, right behind your shoulder, just in case, by chance, you got the turning wrong.

And then, you, a young man in uniform, in the front line of yet another war, I was at hand to watch the bullets miss by inches a heart that had escaped earlier perils many years before.

All those events may have faded into the far distant past, and since then you have led a cautious, if not uneventful, life. And it's true that for a long period of time no suitable occasion presented itself for the two of us to come close again. Even so, I am sure you've never quite forgotten me, never believed I would fail to turn up, one fine, unexpected day. I have no illusions, I know you didn't look forward to my return. But I must confess I would feel disappointed if, after all that's happened, you turned out to be one of those easy going men who are none too keen to meet me face to face. One of those who slip into my arms in their sleep, without a word of greeting or a message of farewell. Small men, making themselves smaller, happy to steal away, unseeing and unseen, without ceremony, under the cover of a starless night.

Yes, quite frankly, I expect better of you. From what I've seen, you never made life easy for yourself, why should it be different now, now that the end is at hand."

My heart jumps. It knows the crunch has come. The fatal words are pronounced for the very first time. The stranger leaves me in no doubt. He is here on business, it's not a social call. We are not now talking generalities, we are not into philosophical truths, we are not exchanging views on living, on dying, and other such abstract themes. The stranger has something more practical, altogether more urgent, in mind. He has come to fetch me. He has come to tell me that it is time.

The first sensation I feel is not one of panic. This, in itself, offers an immediate comfort. But then I realise this absence of terror is due to the fact that I've gone numb. I always go numb when I suffer a shock. To protect myself from the kind of pain, I cannot bear to take all in one go. To give the pain time to spread throughout myself.

My first instinct is to disbelieve what's happening. The stranger is not here, he hasn't come, he has said nothing, the end is nowhere near in sight. This state of disbelief, discrediting my eyes and ears, cannot last. The stark presence of the stranger, the precision of his words, are simply too strong.

The protective numbness wears off. A toxin of anguish works its way through my veins, causing, at first, extreme agitation of both body and mind, then a form of

creeping paralysis. For a while I am constrained to sit immobile opposite the stranger and savour fully my despair. Nothing happens.

I don't know how long it takes to reach, and then breach, my capacity of enduring such anguish. But I have learnt at great expense, over the last few, suffering years, that all feelings, even the worst, are finite. In time they either kill their host or simply exhaust themselves. Thus I am not surprised when I recover my wits and a semblance of my old, well worn composure.

In partial possession of my faculties, still in morbid shackles I call for help. I summon the ghost of my father, because it was he who sowed the seeds of immortality in my soul. Without any trouble, he appears at once. He is in good form. He is his usual hale and hearty, forward looking, optimistic self. He is very encouraging, tells me not to be afraid, tells me there is nothing to worry about. Sadly, he has lost much of his strength. Sadly, he lacks conviction. Sadly, he is a ghost.

Nevertheless, his ghostly appearance reminds me of his huge appetite for life, his monumental will to defy the odds. And so, it occurs to me to try to challenge the stranger's authority. Given the asymmetry of our positions, given my straitened circumstance, the challenge is very timid. I do not ask for his credentials, I do not question his identity. He, obviously, has every right to be here.

But I do suggest, with much respect and due hesitation, I do suggest to the stranger that his visit may have been occasioned by some terrible misunderstanding. After all, other than the natural wear and tear of an ageing frame, there is nothing seriously wrong with me. True, there are worrying signs, omens of sorts, more or less nebulous portents, but they are all open to interpretation. And interpretation is not at all the same as a hard fact. With much circumspection, I put it to the stranger that, unless he has privileged access to higher sources of information, and knows more about me than I do myself, his timing may be slightly off. His arrival, a shade premature. There is a certain vehemence in his response.

"So, we are down to bargaining about the allotted time. I can't say I am surprised. It was always thus. When a man is desperate, in acute discomfort, clinically depressed, I am welcome. A long awaited, honoured guest. There are even, young and foolish men who irrupt in bloody fights, scale improbable peaks, take other outlandish risks, to seek me out. And, we must not forget the few exceptions. Men who have nothing to say, men who receive me with equanimity, men who are ready to die.

As for the rest, it invariably comes to pleading... arguing... begging... crying... cheating... playing... whatever... all just for a little more time. You have no idea of the cost, of the effort, of the waste involved in their attempt to try to gain extra time. To accomplish in those "precious" moments all they've failed to do in one lifetime.

The excuses on offer, you wouldn't credit them. They must absolutely attend a daughter's wedding... see a first grandchild come into the world... finish work on a vital project... clinch a complicated deal ages in the making... set the garden to rights... make peace with a neighbour... decorate the bedroom... read unopened books covered in dust ... discover the ultimate truth, make love one more time, see a total eclipse of the sun...

It is pathetic. Seldom, these days, am I called on to intervene and remove men before their prime. All of them have had their opportunities to do what they wanted, to experience what they were capable of experiencing. They indulged themselves, paid no attention, lost the thread, chickened out, compromised, got permanently distracted, forgot their desire, gave up on their ambition, abandoned their dreams.

And then, when I finally appear on the scene, they've got the nerve to want a postponement. A postponement to put right a lifetime of wrong. They expect me to hang about, to wait at their convenience, whilst they try to cram untold years of neglect into one, very last, magic moment. It's ridiculous."

I find I cannot disagree with the gist of what the stranger is saying. Within such general terms, I can see no justification for keeping him waiting. No grounds for a stay of execution.

I feel much of his speech applies to me. I cannot altogether escape the cruel classification listed. I did indulge myself, I compromised, I got seriously distracted and, at least for a while, I let the thread of my life slip through my fingers. But I kept paying very careful attention, I've some ambition left and I do still dream, As for chickening out, I don't know. I am not a good judge on that particular subject.

On reflection, it strikes me that, in all his vehemence, the stranger failed to respond to my suggestion that his coming may just, conceivably, be premature. It is, admittedly, a tentative idea, put forward with some hesitation. Still, as it could be of some importance to me, it should not be brushed aside. Especially as the stranger came for me, without a final resolution, at least on three previous occasions. And, on his own admission, he has been kept waiting, in many instances, and by many people, before.

Now that my anguish has subsided to bearable proportions, now that I am a little more composed, it occurs to me that the stranger's timing is not exact. Maybe he is mistaken sometimes as to the date, the hour of an appointment previously made. Maybe, he is very good at sensing when the time is about ripe, when a man has, more or less, reached the edge. Maybe, he comes, riding high on probabilities. Maybe, he comes knowing that he may have to linger, that he may have to come back a second time. And, perhaps, keep coming back again and again. I do not give voice to these doubts, they might give offence. In any case, the stranger carries on talking. He seems most anxious to unburden himself.

“I am not saying that the time gained, here and there, hypothetically speaking, cannot be put to a good use. But in my experience this happens very, very rarely. I don’t know about you, but I don’t believe in a last gasp repentance, a deathbed conversion, a blinding insight on the very point of death.

No, no, all this fuss, all this trouble to purloin a man a little extra time is nothing to do with all that. Nothing to do with putting his affairs in order, making his peace with his creator, saying a touching farewell to embarrassed friends, impatient relations. What this all about, as you well know my friend, is fear. Just plain, unadulterated fear. Fear, with, a touch of greed mixed in. Greed for a few more years, even a few more days of the very same kind of existence he has lived all his life. Or do you disagree?”

The stranger stops speaking. Leans over towards me. Looks me straight in the eye. Expects a reply to his question, a question which lends itself to no laconic answer. No straightforward “yes” or a simple “no”.

For I cannot deny that I tremble at the thought of dying. And when it comes to partaking of the fascinating, pulsating, substance of life, I am an absolute pig.

Yet, now the stranger is here, perched right opposite me, making what sounds like an official pronouncement, I find my hand is not visibly shaking, my heart is not beating any faster, my voice, when it comes back to me, is surprisingly strong.

Now that the end is virtually in sight, I find I cannot afford to have my life carry on as before, as if nothing has changed, as if nothing has happened. I can either bow to the fates or take on another, a different challenge.

This still leaves the question of time high on the agenda. Bargaining has been mentioned, but so far as I am aware, as yet the bargaining has not begun. I do not have the courage to press the stranger for precise figures, lest he commits himself to a date, a finite span. So many months, or weeks, or days. As against that, he has said nothing so far to allay my suspicions that he has come a little early, drawn here by rumour, on the off chance.

But if his timing is uncertain, if he is not sure about the appointment, if he does not know whether it’s final, it dawns on me suddenly that the stranger cannot be the sole arbiter, the one who decrees, on his own, the exact time. Doubts not as to his identity, but his power, his influence, his authority to negotiate and settle the matter, here and now, once and for all.

The stranger gets up. Walks round the table to stand behind my chair. I do not see him but feel his bony hand rest lightly on my shoulder as he speaks in a voice that has changed almost beyond recognition. It lost its vehemence, it’s an octave or so lower, it is soothing, comforting and has a soporific quality which is meant to lower my guard.

“Do you really not know who sent for me? A man of your intelligence? A man of curiosity, a man of an inquiring habit of mind? Surely, it cannot come as a surprise?

Surely, you must have guessed by now that I was now summoned here by none other than you, yourself. Who else, on this earth, can possibly know that it is the right time for you to die, that you are willing, at last, to surrender to me?"

Yes. Yes. Of course. How could I have been so blind?! A shadow falls across my eyes. There is a traitor in the camp. The enemy is both within and without. In the struggle with the stranger, I am divided against myself. Gripped by a new fear, overwhelmed by a sense of being betrayed, I have become an easy prey.

And the stranger, not unaware of my weakened state, in a low, insinuating voice, continues in a most persuasive way.

"It need not be such a monumental decision... it need not be a decision at all. You are not called upon to perform a spectacular act of courage... you don't have to steel yourself to face a severe test of nerves. I am prepared to accept that you were not born naturally brave. As a matter of fact, I am not asking you to do anything at all, you merely have to let go... that's all.

I have noticed you have this instinct to cling on... a sort of dumb determination to persist when all is obviously lost. I suppose such obduracy has its uses, if you are young, or in your prime, if you have an excess of energy and abundant strength to salvage what's left and start all over again. But now, at your age, when you need all the strength you've got just to keep going, what's the point of this obstinate, will?

It is just a waste. It is worse than a waste. This sort of stubborn, senseless, resistance has a price. A high price. Unnecessary suffering. Remorseless degeneration of your faculties. The loss of your dignity. Is it worthwhile? Are you prepared to pay it?"

The ghost of my mother. She is not in the horrible state she was at our last meeting. She is not sitting on the soiled mattress of a hospital cot, eyes uncomprehending, saliva dripping from a loose, tooth forsaken mouth. The ghost standing in front of us is much better preserved than that. She is slender, even frail, bones clearly defined under the skin of an agitated, highly expressive face. She wears a full head of fine, greying hair neatly set, tears are welling in her eyes. Sad tears of fond farewell for she has come to say good-bye. Good-bye for the very last time.

That is how she came to me, once on a previous occasion, refusing to eat in anticipation of an unnecessary operation for a non-existent cancer, convinced the time had come for her to die. Only, I did not allow her to die. Foolishly, I thought I knew better. Selfishly, I wanted to save her pain, save me pain, save pain all around. Tragically, all I did was to invent a new kind of agony. My mother's ghost retreats. The stranger, his presence stronger than ever, stays.

"You might as well admit it, the fierce flames of desire have ceased burning a long time ago. You are not looking forward to the rising sun with impatient expectations... and where is your famous zest, your wild sense of adventure? You might as well admit

it, you're tired. Tired not just of this or that particular pursuit, but a little weary of everything.

Thus far you have been fortunate. You've had some narrow escapes. Contrary to some expectations you've had a rich, eventful, and, on the whole, a successful life. Why push your luck? Why tempt providence?

It's not as if you have to let go suddenly, all at once. I am not a witchdoctor, you are not a savage who goes out alone into the bush, on orders, to lie down and simply die. Nothing as dramatic, as brutal as that. Together we'll do it gently, gradually, bit by bit, to spare you, as far as possible, any unpleasant shocks.

But, of course, you must help. You will have to agree to cut back. To do increasingly less. No new ventures. No new projects. No new responsibilities. No new work. No more acquisitions. No new loves, no new games. And as for the work, and loves, and games presently in progress, you will have to neglect them by delicate degrees, and forego the formalities of a satisfying end.

Even more important, the lifelong investments you have made, in people, in knowledge, in things, the investments that you hold so dear to your heart, you will have to learn to loosen your grip, and let them slip quietly away.

Oh, I almost forgot... you have to relinquish control. No, no, don't tell me you find it impossible. Don't tell me you have staked your life on it. That keeping control has become ingrained. I am afraid, here there is no choice. As of now you'll just have to practise the art of yielding. Practice until you know how. It will take time. And when I speak of time, compared to what you already had, the time left may be very brief..."

So it's true. The date, the hour, is not yet inscribed in stone. For all his dreadful power, for all his intimate knowledge, the stranger does not carry an immutable script. He is willing to negotiate. The subject of the negotiation, as I predicted, is time. But he doesn't offer me a great deal. On the contrary, he would like to take some of my promised life away. He doesn't like waiting. He wants to accelerate the end.

And what do I get in return? An easier passage, a lesser ordeal, no wretched pain, a death more merciful?

"Of course, you understand, I cannot guarantee it. There are certain imponderables, one can never be absolutely sure. But in my experience, and my experience, believe me, goes a long way back, it is the struggle that causes the suffering. It is the useless resistance that prolongs the pain. Once you have learned to give up fighting, once you are reconciled to coming with me, your troubles are over. The rest is a piece of cake.

The actual moment of dying is a unique experience. It doesn't repeat itself. Those who go through with it cannot very well leave an account of it behind. I know it's a hackneyed metaphor, and I am ashamed to repeat it, but the experience of dying is very much like falling asleep. You know how it is. First, when you are still wide awake,

there are some remembered events of the current day. Then, when you lose focus, these events become events that might have been. As you drowse, they splinter into faces and places, words and things, lines, shapes, colours, images that you cannot hold, images that move too fast to mean anything. And finally, when you lose all awareness, there is nothing left.

Now, if you are afraid of dying, these events that you see, these detached faces, unspoken words, vague forms and fleeting images are all etched in terror. A passage of such tormenting intensity that I would wish it even on my worst enemy.

If, on the contrary, you are relaxed, inclined to come, whatever you see as you lie dying, is painted in light, benign colours and comes as a comfort to a body worn out. A relief to an exhausted mind aching for a rest.”

From the base of the shoulders, right up to the back of my neck, a warm current of mild pleasure works its way through tense of muscle and along ragged pathways of nerves all tangled up. It unwinds pent-up coils, it soothes trembling tendrils, it floods my troubled being with an alchemy that numbs, releases, sedates. I feel at peace. I yawn. My eyelids are closing. It must be all his doing, the stranger standing behind my back. Although I do not feel his massaging fingers and do not sense the probing pressure of his manipulating hands, I do hear clearly, his soft, stifling voice.

“That’s right, that’s right... you are doing well... you are going easy on yourself... you’re letting go... nice and quiet... no holding back... you see, there is nothing to be frightened of... it is when you see it happening to others, that’s when it’s real bad... when life goes out and the body left behind is cold to the touch... when you hear the agony of it all at second hand... when someone else, ingrown into your life is torn away and you are still half alive with a huge, bleeding emptiness...”

But when you, yourself are the one to die, it need be nothing like as terrible. You may even surprise yourself by the informal ease of the event... by the absence of gravity... by the air of detachment once the news is out and everyone knows you are not long for this world. You may wonder, at the very last moment, why all the hullabaloo... and regret the time, thought, and apprehension, you spent considering it...”

Except, of course, for the separation. The separation, that is, between me, who is about to die, and all those who matter and who will stay alive... My family record isn’t too brilliant in this regard. Mother overplayed such occasions, believing each one to be the last. Father drained them of feeling, for him parting had to be abrupt. No more than one straight look in the eye and a strong, manly embrace. But then for him there was always the confident expectation of yet another chance, yet another day.

I may find it hard to devise a separation that is just right, that works, that is appropriate. Not over dramatic, to exaggerate the pain. Not too many tears, to reveal how sorry I feel for myself. No blabbering, no brave jokes to relieve the underlying

embarrassment. Not too loud a silence to betray what words, on such occasions, should never attempt to say.

“No doubt you’ll work on it, there is still time enough for that. In any case, when you let go and let me take over, you’ll find it all gets so much more simple, you’ll find all this doesn’t really matter any more...”

The warm current of mild pleasure circulates now throughout my body, generating a sense of uniform well being in the whole of myself. Except that there appears to be no centre to me, where I reside. Not a single location from which I, myself, can act.

The awareness of this lack, of catching my self in the act of dissolving, sets alarm bells ringing. Their tocsin wrenches me out of the chair and turns me round to face the stranger, who is still in the same place, standing visibly disappointed, upright in his usual, unremitting stance.

I feel as though I have just woken from an unsettled sleep. I feel a convalescent, having recovered from a fatal disease. One in intensive care but off the danger list. I feel I have come back to my senses.

Still frail, still shaken, I have found a new voice in which to talk to the stranger. The voice is not one of anger, not one of recrimination. It is not steeped in sadness and does not have the whine of special pleading. It does not carry the force of clever argument or that of sweet reason. But it has in it some firmness. And I can do with this firmness for there is a struggle going on between us, the stranger and I. A struggle I cannot give up. A struggle, sadly, I cannot win.

In this new found voice I tell the stranger that I am grateful he came, grateful that he accepted my invitation, an invitation that was, doubtless, issued by me. I tell him that I appreciate his concern for the state of my health, for my soul, for my future. I tell him I am persuaded of the truth of his statements. I tell him I seek no debate, no disagreement. I also tell him, in this new found voice, that despite it all, I am not in a hurry to leave, that I intend to take my chances and linger, if possible, a little while longer. I am sorry if this causes him some inconvenience, some adjusting of schedules. I assure him that while he is here, he is to be my honoured guest, free to make my home, also his. The stranger, takes note of my hospitality, but is displeased.

“It is very civilised of you to have me stay here and share the facilities. At least we do not have to play hide and seek all the time. And I must say I like your company, your conversation is stimulating, your ideas are out of the ordinary, really quite original.

But, as you know, I am very busy, I have a great deal to do and detest being late. If you don’t mind, I’d like to finish the business and be on my way. To put it bluntly, I don’t get your hesitation, your resistance, your obstinate refusal to come.

After all, you have done in your life more than anyone has a right to expect. You have played a rich variety of games and won a fair share. You have subjugated women

and bent strong men to your will. You have amassed a fortune and sired a generation of promising heirs. You have tasted the forbidden pleasures of a perverse imagination and yet been blessed by the unearned love of a family, evidently close and content. You have the unstinting support of outstanding friends. You have been allowed to climb the intoxicating heights and explore the darkest, depressing depths in search of an elusive truth never given to man. What more could you want? What more could you conceivably have?"

I am taken aback by the stranger's words. He has shown such an intimate familiarity with my affairs, I thought he understood. Not so. For he, of all people, should know that the need for that elusive truth, once inbred, towards the end of life, becomes ever more intense.

And there is something else. He, of all people, should know that, being of a dramatic turn of mind, I want a good ending. I want the last act, the last scene of that last act, to be at least in keeping with my style. It is a modest enough ambition, when compared, for example, to the last rites of Tutankhamun before he crossed the Nile to his resting place in the Valley of the Kings. I have not aspired to make my life a work of art, nor do I intend to devote what's left of it to create in burnished images of praise a magnificent, indestructible tomb.

But the way things end has an especial significance. It may cast its shadow backwards to obscure all that was achieved. It may also weave together, and so redeem, the partial failures of a life spent in improbable pursuits. An ending, precisely because it comes at the end, may even lay bare a secret that was religiously kept, for a lifetime, by a man from own self.

For these reasons, and others, as yet undisclosed, in my case, the ending is of paramount concern. The stranger has come here early not through a misunderstanding. He has come to help concentrate my mind. Before his arrival I tended to postpone the essentials, to defer the most difficult, the best, the most worthwhile. Having him in my sight, this is no longer possible. Now I have to do it all. There is no time to wait, to wait for a better day, a more conducive mood.

Although time is of the essence, it is not a mere question of time. True, the stranger does introduce a fabulous note of urgency, but it goes way beyond that. Our hard bargaining, our intense intercourse, our mutual struggle, may provide yet another chance, the very last, to glimpse at a meaning that I have sought all my life.

And another thought. It seems I have invited the stranger, at least partly, to keep an eye on him. To accustom myself to his presence. To familiarise myself with the way he operates. To anticipate his moves. I cannot have him creeping about in the outer darkness, all set to grab me with a sudden lunge, and take me unawares.

For I am not that stupid. I know that for all the politeness, all the fine talking, for all the consideration we show each other, we are in opposite camps. The stranger has a terminal mission. Ultimately, he is devoted to that. I still want to live my life, and live it to the very fullest extent.

I know that to have him so near me, sharing my space, is a risk. The stranger is well placed to undermine my defences. In moments of tiredness, in times of weakness, he will be here to infiltrate himself and finish off the affair. I can no longer afford to lower my guard, to rest my eyes, to laze about.

But, having the stranger all the time in my sight gives me a priceless chance to educate my fears. So that when our struggle reaches its climax, in the hour of my defeat, I am not petrified in terror, not crying like a child, not trembling helpless, not dying finally of shame.

In the meanwhile, we, the stranger and I, in close proximity, are engaged in a macabre dance of proverbial proportions. Moving in a strange, discordant harmony, each of us will have to watch his own step, as well as that of his adversary. It's not a beguiling prospect for me so to dance away the rest of my days. For him it must be a frustrating routine. His voice though shows no impatience as he casually raises a subject not touched on before.

"I am surprised you haven't yet asked me where I am taking you. Once, of course, it is time for us to leave. It's one of the first questions people ask me and keep pestering for an answer to the very last. I suppose, being such a stickler for logic, you must have guessed that I do not have the answer. It lies outside my domain. My domain ends with the end of life. I cannot go, with you or anyone else, beyond."

CHAPTER XXVIII

TIME

“What a stupid question to ask” the micemen said when I caught up with them at last after years of ceaseless running “you wouldn’t expect us to stay around, would you, to be eaten alive, waiting to decide what’s to happen. We’ve been running all our lives, ever since we can remember. Our fathers ran and so did their fathers and, I dare say, their fathers’ fathers didn’t tarry long either. An unfamiliar smell, a sound, a sudden movement and we are off. No sense in biding time until it’s too late to escape. We run because our hearts beat faster, because our flesh creeps, because we tremble all over. We run because we run. It’s as simple as that.”

Still running, in the midst of a stampeding herd of I noticed signs of fatigue, a fatigue that was threatening to overtake me. Muscle stiffening, joints aching, breathless.

The milling mice faces around filled me with a sense of shame. Little darting eyes, looking constantly from side to side, twitching noses, an apologetic smile on lips with no contrition, raised in my throat a degree a loathing all the greater because I was not sure whether I was truly one of them or just a haphazard guest.

I had my doubts. Constitutionally, I am not an ideal runner. I run in brilliant short spurts, but for prolonged periods, I merely linger. I fall behind and have difficulty in rejoining the fleeing race. My heart goes out to those who, in sheer exhaustion, fall by the wayside. And then I keep asking questions the others find senseless. Why run? Why not turn round, stand still and face the approaching onslaught? Or better still, why not move towards it, seek it out, and take one’s chances?

I do not know what finally made the difference. Shame, self loathing, nagging questions, innate curiosity, sheer tiredness or a revolting cocktail of all them. Whatever it was, I stopped running, turned round and began slowly to make my way against the tide of bodies swirling round me, panic stricken, in full flight.

To make some headway against the throng was not easy. Many a time I was knocked down and swept backwards by waves of runners, trampling on each other in their eagerness to get away. Gradually, I learnt to move forward only in rare moments of relative calm, in between bouts of feverish action, and lie flat against the ground, blind and deaf, the rest of the time. To guide me I had but one compass, pointing

steadfastly in the opposite direction to the line of flight. In a vague sort of way, in a contrary mood, I wanted to go towards the danger, to where the micemen fled from, to where the panic must have originally begun.

The practice of lying flat against the ground, blind and deaf to the panicky hordes clambering over me, strengthened my backbone, built up resistance and enabled me to walk upright again. Thereafter the multitudes started to diminish both in stature and in numbers, leaving only groups of stragglers and lame specimen behind.

It took me some time to realise that something was wrong. Something was strangely missing from the scene. There were no pursuers. No predators. No hunters. No avenging host. No one. No one at the heels of the running mobs.

This realisation filled my lungs with crisp mountain air. It brought bright sunlight into the open spaces between my erstwhile companions retreating in the distance and my unencumbered, lonely self. I came to rest after years and years of running. I had the feeling then that I could stay here forever, unafraid.

That feeling lasted precisely one moment. The time it took for a terrible thought to infiltrate a mind suddenly relaxed: this absence of pursuers could be just a temporary lull in the hostilities. A false interval, before the furious onslaught is unleashed. No way of knowing if this thought be true. No way to feel secure. No way to stay and just await an outcome no one could predict. Now that I have turned, I would have to go all the way. As far as is possible to go.

So here I am, free of fleeing micemen, addressing my steps in the general direction of that which, so far, I know only by repute. For signposts I use the hearsay of worried creatures, all trying to get away from where they believe the danger lurks.

The sun is high in the sky. There are no clouds. Visibility could not be better. So it's impossible to miss the figure of a reclining man laid out by the roadside, even though everything in me wants to look the other way. The red rimmed eyes are wide open but the figure is not, not yet, a corpse. Emaciated, skeletal, his skin a loose, ragged mantle of suppurating sores, he is too weak to brush off the swarm of fat horse flies feasting on exposed, weeping soft tissue, which he knows to be his own. Even with the road between us, the emanating stench churns my stomach, forcing its undigested contents up my queasy throat.

I know there is nothing I can do to help the dying man. I do not have a handy weapon, nor the moral fortitude to finish him off. At the same time, there is such a pain and plea in his eyes that I just cannot pass by without stopping to acknowledge his miserable state. I cross the road. Standing over him, I see his lips move. I drop on one knee, approach my ear to his mouth, but all I hear is a whisper too shallow to convey meaning, too faint to formulate words.

My revulsion gets the better of me, I turn my head, and not looking back, move off. Further along I see a second such figure, laid out dying beside the road. Then, close by, a third and a fourth. I avoid the look in their eyes and hasten my steps only to encounter death embodied many more times in the very same, ugly, horrifying form.

Keeping to the road, going straight ahead, I come to a large wooden cross planted centuries ago. The sculpted image of a suffering Christ was deliberately removed. A stern notice is now nailed in his stead. A notice addressed to passers by. A notice they are all supposed to heed.

THE PLAGUE

This domain is out of bounds. All persons entering it do so at their own peril.

The disease is highly contagious. Once contracted, its effects are deadly.

There is no known remedy against it.

There are no available means to ease the condition of the dying.

The cause of the pestilence has not been established.

All living things are suspect.

All sources of nourishment may be infected. All water supplies may be poisoned.

The text of the notice is hand printed so, probably, there are other copies in existence, affixed elsewhere. The paper is much yellowed, so the outbreak of the plague is not recent. Perhaps the very worst is over and what I see are the last few remaining victims of its ravaging sweep. But even if there has been no improvement, I am not for turning, there is nowhere else for me to turn. I am here, I have taken heed of the notice, and now I am resolved to carry on.

The number of living corpses is not diminishing, nor is it showing signs of escalating at an alarming rate. Victims occur with a monotonous frequency as I progress towards what I judge to be the core of the place. At the point of its irruption a council is in session. The owlish creatures with horn rimmed glasses, although coated in white and inclined to use professional terms, are members of an esoteric medical team.

Deliberations are loud and lively. Nobody pays attention to what the others are saying, each individual seems only intent on having his voice heard. Speeches are interrupted, thoughts are left trailing, words are cut off. To me, a silent observer, the fragments are suggestive, their relevance unclear.

“... no question, the old are more vulnerable, more likely to succumb to it than the young ...

...but there is no verifiable single cause ...

... on the contrary, the organ attacked is always the one with an inherent weakness ...

... it's not the self same organ in every case, there is a wide ranging spread ...
... is often the lungs ...
... and the heart ...
... and the stomach, and bowels, and kidneys, and the bladder, and blood, bone, prostrate, liver, brains and all the rest of it, there is no discernible pattern ...
... what matters is the agent, it's all the work of the agent, if we could only isolate the agent, or at least the means of transport it uses to circulate so incredibly fast ...
... ban dogs, kill cats, forbid handshakes, abandon fucking, turn off the taps, stop breathing ...
... olive oil, olive oil and tomatoes, perhaps some red wine, not too much, two or three glasses a day ...
... no stress, no boredom, no strain ...
... plenty of exercise, aerobic exercise, to invigorate the flow and release a stream of Serotonin into the ...
... we are running out of morphine and the type of morphine left doesn't really help towards the end ...
... they are all doomed in any case, they are all probably infected already, it's just a question of when the symptoms first ...
... the period of incubation, the period of incubation, the period of incubation ...
... resistance counts, resistance counts for a great deal ...
... you can never tell, the ones who yield may linger on, the obstinate, stiff necked, may perish at once ...”

The owlsh creatures adjust their horn rimmed glasses, go on declaiming, pay attention to no one and notice me not at all. The voice of the council is indistinct. But from the little I gather it's obvious that the prospect of the people is grim. It was a mistake to come here, it was reckless of me to defy the Notice, to cross the boundaries of the infested domain. Perhaps I relied too much on my compass which has pointed steadfastly in one direction. Dead against the line of flight.

Now that no one is fleeing, the needle of my compass is turning circles. It refuses to settle and give me an aim. Having lost my bearing I wander about, keeping within sight only those who, so far, show no evident sign of disease. It intrigues me how they can live with a rampant plague cavorting in their midst. I am curious to know why it is they simply do not try to run away.

The cemetery has grown out of all proportion and swallowed up nearly half the suburbs built with hope in previous, prosperous years. The whole extent of it is vibrant with action, there is hardly a corner of quiet and peace. Huge metallic claws are busy churning the soil, leaving behind rectangular cavities eleven foot deep. Armies of monumental masons are at work on headstones of marble, inscribing with

mallet and chisel, the names, ages and merits of men gone underground but vaguely remembered still. Vendors of flowers display openly the colourful variety of their slow wilting wares and do brisk trade in grief, duty and comforting tears. In solemn procession rows of black horses draw rows of black carriages followed by row upon row of mourners five abreast, all on foot, all shrouded in professional grey. Piles and piles of unseasoned coffins, hastily cobbled together, are being readied for their suffering, impatient tenants to be.

“We can’t complain. There is plenty to do. The money is reasonable, hardly a shortage of hands. And there is an added benefit. Those engaged in this business, dealing with the dead, subject to satisfactory performance, are immune from the disease.”

The voice is one of authority. One schooled in transmitting orders, in making demands, demands never questioned, demands invariably fulfilled. The speaker, a vulture in a crimson academic gown, has a chain of office around his neck to indicate to any who might doubt that he is indeed the Director of Funereal Services.

I am unaware of having inquired as to the state of his business but his chatty remarks permit me to ask the Director whether any diggers, any flower sellers, mourners, coffin makers, any of his people at all, have ever fallen victim to the plague.

“As a matter of fact, yes. Quite a few. But then we don’t know, do we, if they failed to perform, if they were conscientious, if they cheated, if they respected the dead enough, if they really gave full satisfaction in their work.”

Many suburbs, of those still left outside the cemetery walls, have been converted into a vast clinical zone. A zone curiously devoid of hospitals, doctors, nurses, professional carers and anyone afflicted by the dreaded disease. The accent is very much on prevention, not at all on cure. The people who flock here seem perfectly healthy, admirably fit.

The zone has three types of structures: arenas for stationary movement, feeding stations and halls which are stress free.

A typical arena is populated by a forest of wheels. The wheels vary greatly in size but each one is firmly anchored to a concrete stand. Men in shorts and vests, undergo tests and, based on the result, are allocated each to an appropriate wheel. Using arms and legs, the men proceed then to turn the wheels with all their strength. They keep at it as long as their hearts and lungs permit. The time and the number of revolutions is accurately counted by a device which also conveniently prints the figures indelibly on the performer’s skin. Later on, when sunbathing, and in the changing rooms, these imprints are discussed, admired and jealously compared.

Feeding stations are designed not to dispense food. They are frequented by men who want to be sure they are not eating anything contaminated by the disease. The

standard diet is made up mainly of extracts of imported plants, cultivated in isolated patches, protected by glass, grown under strict supervision. The portions, generally minute, are served in the form of transparent oils and capsules of pulverised solids, coded by colour, swallowed with ease.

Stress free halls are dotted all along the perimeter of the zone, to be quickly accessible to those anguished wherever they happen to be. Not that the men crossing the threshold have anxiety writ large on their face. They seem inordinately relaxed as they are floating, with eyes closed, in blissful silence, on foam of soothing, neutral green.

As distinct from the crowds who come from the outside to make use of the facilities of the clinical zone, I observe a number of hawk-eyed individuals, quite unlike any of the others, who never enter but move singly round and round the whole length of the zone's perimeter. Their incisive walk and watchful gaze lead me to assume they are guardians, on routine patrol. I fall in with their steps, hoping to gain some insight into the protected zone.

"We don't encourage patients. We are not equipped to treat them. Besides it's not a good idea to mix the healthy with the sick. Those who come here, come here deliberately to get away from the disease. They are entitled to feel that there is no place for it here. It's a lot to do with confidence. The whole zone's very existence depends on it."

This is all very well but I cannot help asking the same question again and again. What about all these men, men straining at wheels, imbibing oil, living off pills, men entirely free of stress, are they one and all immune to the disease?

"This is very hard to say. We have no official records of comings and goings. On principle, we do not have a register of names. We can't be expected to know who is missing and if missing, whether he will ever come back here again."

We chat a little more, about this and that, as we stride along an invisible fence, but as to the matter that bothers me so, they remain mute.

The space between the cemetery and the clinical zone is spanned by a giant marquee. Inside, a multitude prostrate on its knees. Head bent, eyes lowered, self absorbed, each and every man stubbornly recites the very same words. But, at least for me, in the communal chanting, their meaning is lost. All I can make out is that the common words are oft repeated, repeated with fervour, intensity and belief.

I take it that the community is in prayer and sure enough I spot someone who looks remarkably like a priest. He is not disguised in the customary vestments of the established church. He carries no recognisable emblem of ecclesiastic authority but displays the air of confidence of one who has forever administered the faith. When he speaks to me, his manner of delivery betrays a practised preacher, comforter and blesser of troubled souls.

“The plague has been kind to us. What you see here is just an overflow. The cathedral, the churches are always full. We had to augment the order of our services and still there is not enough room to meet the desperate need.”

But, I cannot forbear to ask, are the prayers answered, are those who so ardently pray, safe? Are they immune to infection, exempt from disease? Are all these kneeling people here going to live? The answer is clever, considering it's no answer at all.

“That is not the point. No one can estimate the material efficacy of prayer, although there can be no doubt that faith heals. At any rate, we are not here to help prevent the decay of the body. We are here to nurture the soul even as the body decays.”

I am at a loss. The domain is in the grip of a virulent plague. The council is bewildered. The inhabitants are taking exercise, adhere to an esoteric diet, try to relax and devote what's left of their time to prayer. They wait for the ominous symptoms to appear, suffer the ravages of an incurable disease, die, bury, mourn, commemorate each other and that's it. No one tries to run away. No one attempts to flee.

“Ah, that is just where you are wrong. They are all running, they are all trying to escape. Of course they are doing it right here, staying where they were born, where they grew up, where they belong. There is simply nowhere for them to go.”

The lady who is addressing herself to me looks unbelievably young for her age. No untoward lines mar the satin skin on neck or face. The rich, glossy bronze curls of hair cascading onto her shoulders show no tinge of white, of grey. Her stance is open, she moves lightly, with flowing ease. It is only her voice which, in its richness, reveals the experience of ages. And her eyes which, in quality of perception, show unmistakably that she has seen and understands it all.

“It is an optical illusion. A habit of the eye which associates fleeing with moving from place to place. You can just as easily flee from one time to another time, staying in the very same place.”

In front of this lady I am naked. So well does she read my unexpressed feelings, so well does she divine thoughts unspoken I had thus far considered my own.

“I see you are baffled. You find it difficult to grasp how people can carry on from one day to the next with the plague claiming at random victim after victim, apparently at will. They know their turn will come any moment, so they try to escape into the next moment, one further along. And they keep on moving, from moment to moment, hoping to stay one step ahead. Hoping to put off forever the coming of the evil day.”

The husky voice carries affection, sympathy and even the vague likelihood of a degree of love. It does not argue, it does not wish to instruct, it is resigned to the conceit and self delusion inherent in all men.

“You may find it strange but those most closely involved with death and the dying, feel they are altogether in a different time zone to that of the plague. Members of the

funereal guild, permanent guests of the clinical zone, those kneeling in prayer, each one of them is busy trying to put some distance between himself and the terminal disease. The distance is simply one of time, not space. But it's still a distance for all that. By doing what they are doing their only object is to safeguard this distance. They are still running, and it is nothing but a flight, call it what you will."

It takes me awhile to translate her terms into my own language. I have always supposed that in a reality too harsh to endure, convenient beliefs, and the dubious activities they generate, are of great comfort. Whether they save a single life, the funereal activities, the stationary wheels, dieting, prayers, utter relaxation, provide in such trying times hope, comfort, and some sort of escape. Nothing new here.

But the idea that you could run away standing still, the idea of a flight in time, that had not occurred to me before. I find it striking.

Running lifelong with a breed of micemen, constantly looking behind me for signs of invisible pursuers, became an ingrained habit. When, so late in life, I turned around at last, I headed in the opposite direction. I started walking backwards and expected to meet my pursuers, sooner or later, head on, somewhere in the distant East.

Now, here I am, trapped in the environs of a deadly epidemic, with nowhere to aim, with nobody, with nothing to confront. I do not feel I belong here, and yet I have no reason to believe I am immune. The micemen are long gone. Once more I am alone. Alone, that is, except for the incredibly young looking lady who is herself, evidently, a stranger to the place. She takes my hand, looks into my eyes and speaks to me in tones of touching simplicity.

"It isn't such a revelation. It should not even come as a surprise. From the very beginning distance has had two measures. It could always be worked in hours as well as counted in yards. Surely, you remember your school days, how far the kick-off appeared in the morning of a cup final. How close an exam was, weeks, even months, away. And how the dimensions of the town altered when you first got on your bike and the furthest friend was suddenly but a few minutes' ride away."

Of course I remember the excruciating wait for the start of every game. Of course I remember the oppressing proximity of each distant, menacing date. But what have they to do with a lifelong flight. A flight I was taught by micemen in my very infancy. A flight that I now have to bring to an end.

We all ran, and we did not run in some fancy time, we just kept running away, running from one place to the next. There just has to be someone, something we have been fleeing. And I have to meet that someone, that thing, somewhere soon.

"So now that your compass has packed up, now that nobody is seen to be running, you are captive to the plague and need help. Help to get away, help to set you free. This is all you see, this is what you feel. And, of course, you don't listen."

Her words are strict, her judgement harsh but the voice is full of kindness. She does not condemn, no reproach is intended. Uncharacteristically, I do not argue, do not plead, do not try to justify myself. I fall silent and my silence is a consent. More than a consent, an invitation. An invitation for the lady of youthful semblance to lead me wherever she will.

“Had you listened you would have realised that what you have been fleeing is right here. You have stopped running, turned round and came back. This is truly commendable, a mark of courage. Now you are exactly in the place where you ought to be.”

I don't believe it. It doesn't sound right. I thought, without thinking, that she would lift me up, carry me with her, or, at the very least, show me the way. It was a desperate measure to pause in mid flight. It took all of my manhood to turn back and move against the tide of alarmed and alarming runners. And now, steeled for a showdown, willing at last to face the onslaught, I am to be detained here, victim among victims of an ancient poison which has no antidote. Victim of a fatal disease, bereft of cure.

What have I to do with pestilence, pandemic and plagues that went out of fashion centuries ago. What have I to do with people engaged in meaningless funerary rites, people who exhaust their bodies in futile exercise and their minds in prayers that can make no difference. What have I to do with this place of ritual habit, strict clinical supervision and endless living corpses. Corpses littering the streets, corpses waiting to die. What has this place to do with me? An affectionate, tolerant smile accompanies the lady's response which, I have to confess, comes as a severe shock.

“Everything. It has everything to do with you. You wouldn't remember, so much has happened in between, but you were born here, and here is where you belong.”

No. It cannot be. I recognise not a single landmark. I have no friend, acquaintance, no cousin, even at the third or fourth remove. The local art, artefact and architecture are alien, no feeling of kinship whatsoever exists between the place and me.

“All the same, I am afraid it is the truth. You have simply wiped out the traces of your origins from memory. An act that is rare, but not unprecedented. It happens when extreme terror dislocates the mind so that some of it is lost and the past has to be learned anew. What is exceptional is your return. The others, after many years of running, seldom find their way home ever again.”

Even if she's right, it is still all wrong. I cannot accept that I've made this colossal effort merely to end up here, waiting with everyone else, to die of the plague. I just cannot see myself on my knees in prayer, eating and exercising under compulsive clinical supervision, or as a permanent employee of a decrepit funereal rite.

And besides, I have serious doubts that this is the place where it all started. I am not convinced that what I see here in front of my eyes is what made me run in the first place and kept me running for sixty odd years.

“Why, isn’t what you have here horror enough for you? Have you taken the time to lift the lids of the coffins, have you peeped under the shrouds, have you been to the mortuary to inspect the corpses? Have you spent an evening or two at the concert hall, listening to the orchestrated screams of those dying in pain? Have you made the hospital rounds and smelt the multiple layers of disinfectant administered in vain to disguise the subtle, all pervasive presence of dying? Have you made use of the rooms recently vacated by the dear departed and entertained the family, overcome by grief? Have you waited a few hours in the waiting rooms anticipating the verdict? The verdict, pronounced by their own blood, whether they are tainted or, for the moment, are free to breathe. Have you accompanied those still hale and hearty to the naked mirrors, where they examine in detail every pore of their miserable skin? In trepidation, lest they uncover tell tale signs, innocent harbingers of the guilty disease.”

The questions, although suggestive, are posed with no hint of reproof. They are posed by someone with concern for me, someone who would like to open my eyes, to look anew, to learn, to think again.

The answer, I have to admit, to all of these questions, is a reluctant “no”. Reluctant. The class of Reluctants, that is where I belong. There are other classes. Like the Indifferents. Those who in the presence of all these horrors remain indifferent. Like the class of Obsessives. Those who take in these horrors a keen personal interest. Those who, in their boyhood probably tore off the wings of flies, operated on live insects, watched intently the dying convulsions of cats strung up by their neck. And now that they have grown up, visit the sick and, with flowers and dry eyes, inhabit the graves of the deceased. Like the class of Ignorers. Those who see and hear and smell but choose deliberately to live their lives as if the horrors just weren’t there.

I am not an Ignorer. I am not an Obsessive. I am not an Indifferent. I am a born Reluctant. I am aware despite myself. I feel it all even when feigning indifference. I still have such hopes that I cannot afford to be obsessed. I am not strong enough to look the dying in the eye and see nothing of any consequence.

So I try to avert my eyes. Try not to feel, try not to be preoccupied, try to get on with my life. Try, but do not succeed. My eyes wander to seek out the horrors of their own accord. Their involuntary presence sends shivers of cold fear through my heart. Shivers that do not permit me to stay here with all the other likely victims, waiting for my body to be branded by the mark of the disease, waiting to die.

“To wait here, with such fear in your heart, requires a kind of courage beyond the reach of most dreaming men. To stay still and await what is to come, without postponing the day, without guarding the distance, without stretching time, is, perhaps, too much to ask.”

Even as she speaks, the beautiful lady of youthful semblance takes me in her arms. Her eyes, bathed in wisdom, soft in sadness, are opposite mine. The polished fingers

of her feminine hands, reputedly possessed of healing, are pressed against my temples to support a head weighed down by unnatural cares. Underlying her words, scarcely audible, an intermittent sigh disturbs the stillness in the air. A sigh for me? For us? On whose behalf?

Maybe, she sighs because being unwilling to run, and being unable to stand still, there is nothing that can be done for me. Maybe, because for the rest of my days, like everybody here, I shall be forced to diet, exercise and pray, in order to delay the march of Time, in order to try to keep the Day of Judgement at bay. Maybe, she sighs because, unlike me, she sees the future and knows only too well what it holds, what it holds for me.

“My poor, poor boy. You are so tired of running and you cannot bear any longer to watch what is happening right in front of your eyes. What’s to become of you ?”

This is not a question, it is the age old expression of parental concern. There appears to be no way out. She seems to have nothing to offer to relieve my plight. Yet something in her manner, a suggestion of a knowing smile on her lips, makes me feel that she is not about to abandon me.

“You are in deep trouble, there is no disguising it. But all is not yet lost. You may still save yourself. There is a fearful secret which, strictly speaking, I should not give away. Revealing it may cause more harm than good. But in your predicament you have nothing to lose. In your predicament, I suppose, you are entitled to take advantage even of the most perilous chance that comes your way.”

Tips of ephemeral fingers brush against my eyelids, sealing them with a butterfly kiss. The fearful secret, whatever it is, will not be given me in so many words. It will be conveyed first through the eyes, by visual means.

I am dwarfed by a giant clock, a clock of a variety I have never come across. It has but one hand, which indicates no minutes, no hours. Instead of sixty divisions, instead of numerals, its face displays the outline of a human heart. The hand is not driven by the measured interplay of cog, pulley and wheel. It is the ebb and flow of a pulsating organ that governs all movement, determines the pace. The quicker the heart beats, the faster the hand revolves. At the top, where the number twelve rightfully belongs, there is a dark recess. The recess, under ominous skies, across a threatening landscape, harbours things too terrifying to describe, too monstrous to keep in view.

Strangely, once the hand reaches the top, the recess is always marvellously empty, all terrors gone. But as the hand goes around approaching once more the place where midnight ought to be, each time without fail the heartbeat quickens, the clock accelerates, terrors return to populate the empty, waiting space.

I remain there, cast in the shadow of the giant clock, for countless revolutions of the uneven hand. Slowly I come to recognise the ominous skies. The threatening landscape

becomes ever more familiar. The midnight terrors keep repeating themselves. And I learn finally that the heart that animates the clock, that heart, is mine.

Gazing, with eyes tight shut, at the clock ruled by an unruly heart, I let the lovely lady's words, carried by a caring voice, invade my unresisting mind.

"Your fear is vested in the future. It has nothing to do with the present or the past. What you dread will never come to pass. What eventually happens may be painful, devastating, worse than you ever imagined, but it will have lost the power to terrify. Fear lives in the anticipation, and dies in the act of living its own forecast."

Her words, seeing what I see, carried by a caring voice, impress. As I watch the movement of the solitary hand bring forth and banish the same terrors either side of midnight, their truth becomes to me self evident. No shadow of doubt, as the time approaches the fears come alive, when the time is past, the fears die.

If this is so, what need is there to be afraid. If this is so, my tormenting terrors are put to rest. If this is so I can breathe again, if this is so, I am free at last.

But wait a moment. Wait a moment before you shout for joy. If this be true, how come the hand of the clock keeps going round and with each round my heart goes pumping wild as the self same haunting terrors, undiminished, keep flooding back. And watching the living corpses die, with myself among the future victims of the plague, how come I am still so hopelessly, so shamefully afraid.

My eyes leave the clock, leave the unruly heart, the deeply deceptive scene. They open in plain disappointment. I have been told a secret, a secret that is no use to me.

The lady, holding my head still between her patient hands, is not in the least upset. She goes on talking to me. Her voice is hardly changed. It is a calm, soothing voice, patient, considerate.

"What you have just seen may be a revelation to you but it is a source of no great secret. That the future never becomes the present is merely an ordinary mystery of Time. That the fearful passage of Time is measured in units of human heartbeat is a matter of common experience. No, the secret lies elsewhere."

Here the lady pauses and a long silence ensues. It is as if she is not sure whether to tell me more, as if she has some doubts that I should be party to the secret, after all. Then she sighs, seems to relent, and carries on.

"You see, when you are afraid time comes towards you, gathering pace. The more afraid you are, the faster the pace. The faster the pace, the greater your fear. When the fear is too great to be contained, you can't help running, but no matter how fast you run, time is running faster still. You can never keep pace. Nearing the end, at the height of your panic, when time runs out, what then? All you can do is to close your eyes, hold your breath, cut off all sensation and let the final moment pass. And in the passing of that moment, blind, breathless, deprived of feeling, you miss the only

chance you ever have of living through what you so dread. Is it any wonder that the terror comes back to haunt you again and again?"

The words are precise, the meaning transparent, the effect overwhelming. It leaves me with nothing to question her insight, to challenge the aptness of what she has chosen to say. But what is to be done to transform a present I cannot endure? What is this dreadful secret which offers my only chance, and promises a glimmer of a hope?

"Your troubles are in the future. To save yourself, you have to reach out into the future and bring the future back into the present mode. This means altering the preordained succession of Time, which, of course, is not possible. Having the secret permits you to make one attempt."

The beautiful, ageless lady of youthful semblance makes it all sound a simple matter of fact. What she is saying now, for me, doesn't make sense. But I am well past caring and her being at once both young and aged gives her, perhaps, a privileged access to the occult mysteries and science of Time.

"When you desire, time moves too slowly. Inevitably, you move to hasten it. When desire is intense, you forget yourself, and all decencies, to drive it violently along.

When you are afraid, time moves too fast. Inevitably, you move to slow it down. When fear is intense, you forget yourself and all you have been taught, to resist with all your puny strength its advance. To bring it, somehow or other, to a merciful pause.

To save yourself from the terrors that blight your life, you will have to redraw what has been deeply entrenched. You will have to reverse your instinctive moves. When you are afraid, when time is running out, you will not resist, you will not put obstacles in its way. The very opposite. You will welcome its advance, you will use what resource you have to assist its passage, to accelerate its terrifying course.

The secret is to desire what you most fear."

Another silence. Maybe, to give me space to reflect. Maybe, to have an interval in which I can grasp the magnitude of such an act. Maybe, to impress upon me the significance of an oracular secret being vouchsafed to a lesser mortal, like myself. Maybe, to invite questions no words of mine can formulate. The silence comes to an end. Thankfully, I am to be granted further hints.

"It is not enough to grit your teeth, to force your eyelids open and face the terrors whenever they happen to appear. Otherwise they will keep pursuing you and you will remain, forever, the pursued. You will have to seek them out, to draw them close, to force them into your presence, only then will you breathe again. To breathe like you always used to. You must want to feel the fear you are most afraid of feeling, to feel that fear right through your heart. You must want it badly enough to bring it into the present, to let it come to pass right here, right now."

Again, I am left behind. The spoken words, delivered, as they are, by the wondrous lady, do seem to have a meaning. But the meaning sadly fails to convey itself to me. I am still at a loss. I still do not know what is it I have to do.

“I must warn you, the attempt is an ordeal. There is no foretelling that you will survive it. And if you survive, no knowing what it will do to you. No one can force you to have a go, but if you try and cheat, most assuredly, you will fail. If you merely rehearse the terrors of your daytime acquaintance, you will stay forever enslaved to your fear. To reach the perfect calm of an unhurried evening, you have to traverse the unknown menace of midnight of your own free will.”

Thus speaks the tempting voice of the wondrous lady and with these words she chooses to take her leave. She has been of some help. She will help no longer. It's now all up to me.

The trouble is I do not know where to begin. How do I summon that which is unknown to me? How do I conjure up that which I have spent a lifetime training not to see? How do I discover that which I have taught myself from early childhood strictly to ignore.

I am assured that the attempt, the ordeal, call it what you will, has to take place right here. Here in this god forsaken place, where the plague rules supreme, where I was born and am to end my days. It is also given that the attempt involves me in publicly embracing my darkest fear. Since, by definition, it is unknown to me, I am reduced to trying the most suspect, the most likely candidates. That is, as the lady has pointed out, the horrors I have, thus far, so conveniently neglected in this domain.

I recall the catalogue of her rhetorical questions and follow each item separately on that demanding list. I accompany those still hale and hearty to the naked mirrors where we examine in dreadful detail the daily condition of our skin.

The examination takes ages. Every square inch, no matter how awkwardly placed, is carefully pored over. Nothing is left to chance. Everyone is only too anxious to assist in the hunt for tell tale signs of the disease, especially if the hunt circles the skin of another creature and not the skin which is their own.

There is a lot of badinage. Much witticism centred on muscular strength and any oddity as to curl and relative size of the male organ. It is all good-natured, brave faced, full of camaraderie. Until, that is, the hunt chances on a prey, until the hunt abuts in a kill.

The locating of a sign abruptly changes the picture. Spirits die, no more jollity is to be had. Ever so slightly, ever so politely, men draw back, leaving the owner of the marked skin surrounded by a vacant circle of silent embarrassment. There may be a half hearted exchange of words, as to the hue, the shape, the configuration of the mark itself. There is always a chance of a misperception, a blemish of skin that looks

like the sign of the disease but isn't that. The odds of such a chance are, however, not ones that would tempt even the most reckless of betting men.

Religiously every morning I present myself in front of the naked mirrors in the company of hale and hearty men. And almost every single morning the dreaded sign appears on an unsuspecting skin. The marked man usually returns the following days, just in case the mark has faded or has chosen to disappear without trace. This does not happen. On the contrary, the mark becomes more pronounced, spreads, multiplies. The quality of the skin deteriorates, those present avert their eyes, the man is banished from sight, never comes back again.

I submit freely my own skin to the naked mirrors and partake of the cruel moment when a man is singled out to suffer and die. Day after anxiety ridden day I force myself to undergo an ordeal that fails to offer the hope of even a transitory relief. Escaping unmarked from a session provides the kind of dubious peace that never lasts out the day. And when I realise that I can never get used to this routine of daily terror, it become evident that I have got it all wrong. Brave though it may have been for a weakling like me to volunteer for such dreadful daily examination, unfortunately it was not what was called for. It was not the attempt that could part me from my anguish. I have failed to bring the future any closer, failed to get rid of the fear that matters, the fear that remains, to me, as yet unknown.

I join a queue of men standing without jackets, shirt sleeves rolled up, left arm bare. One by one the empty syringe plunges to extract a quantity of dark red liquid from each exposed, submissive vein. Then the waiting begins.

Tests are carried out on blood samples. They are scientific and conducted behind closed doors. From time to time, at unpredictable intervals, a nurse emerges to announce the news. The news always concerns one specific individual. There is never any good news. There is just bad news or no news at all.

The bad news is, however, not uniformly bad. The worst kind reveals a particularly malignant strain of the disease, one that travels fast and on its travels implants a rich variety of agonising pain. The best, couched in terms more vague, concerns a species which, although deadly, moves at a more leisurely pace. The body is allowed to decline in easy stages, retaining a residual dignity to the victim's very last days. In between the worst and the best there is a multitude of grades. News of finely assorted gravity, all devastating, all personal, very hard to take.

For the likes of me, waiting without news, there are no distractions. No books, magazines, television. No coffee, music or refreshments. The reaction of those who are delivered the news, however shocking, at the point of impact, is always mundane. There being nothing diverting, I am confined to the occupation of waiting.

I am forever waiting for bad news. I just don't know how bad the news will really be. And I cannot know how long I have to wait.

The waiting is uninterrupted. There are no tea breaks, no periods set aside for rest and recreation. Feast days, Sundays and Bank holidays offer no exemption. In the absence of any other activities, the weight of waiting becomes unsupportable. After giving my blood, and waiting endlessly for unwelcome news, I have come to understand that the whole effort was nothing but a waste. I, no one else, determined the ordeal, but the ordeal was not the ordeal meant for me. A simple error of judgement, nothing to be ashamed of, but the fear that matters, that fear stays with me just the same.

I take lodgings, as suggested, with a family recently bereaved. The room I occupy is the very room vacated by an only son who died just yesterday. What with the plague and everything, funerals are rushed, bodies removed with unseemly haste.

I meet the man in his absence. I catch glimpses of him in photographs framed in happier days. I come near him in the quiet despair of his parents. A mother and father who have scarcely had time to grieve.

We share meals and evenings in a tight, confined community of three. There isn't a great deal of air to breathe, and not many words to be had. Just a vast emptiness, undisturbed, an aching hollow that nobody will ever fill.

I stay with them until I become part of the setting, until they cease to notice me. I am thus given the rare opportunity to witness at close quarters what death can do to those who are not yet dead. How it sucks the life out the ones afflicted, leaving behind an outer shell that, to all appearances, goes on living. A hardened husk sustained by distilled suffering, a suffering that will not allow itself to be diluted.

Never daring to look them in the eye, I watch as the protective shield of disbelief shatters and the first flickers of raw pain begin to burn the heart. At first both of them, mother and father, move mechanically about the house, behaving as if the child had just gone out for a while, as if, any moment, he'll be right back. She has the habit of polishing twice a day the frame of a picture in which a preoccupied child is building sand castles on a deserted, unsunny beach. He is wont to fiddle with a bike, a bike that needs no mending, a bike he will not ever ride again. They even come into my room, unseeing, to make up his bed and place mail addressed to him on a desk left in disarray, taken as he was, sudden like, with no time to settle his affairs.

But the absence is too tangible to be masked by a refusal to believe. A flimsy pretence cannot sustain itself in face of such a loss. The ultimate has come to pass. After indulging in pathetic daydreams to undo what cannot be undone, the parents finally have to admit that their boy is gone. Gone for good. The time for tears has come. Hers surface frequently and flow in abundance down a ravaged face. They

spring from the depths of an inexhaustible supply and are conveyed by sobs which convulse the body and leave the mind deranged. His are silent tears, they form few and far between, barely enough to moist an eye that does not wish to see.

The tears, both his and hers, give me sleepless nights. For they are not the kind that heal, that wash the pain away. They are the tears of despair. Despair because, being the parents they are, they have given their son their own lives. Now that he's gone, they have nothing left.

As I lie sleepless in a bed I share with someone who is already dead, it occurs to me that I have condemned myself to live in a place where there is no hope. No likelihood of laughter, no chance of a smile that is content, no single moment of true joy. It occurs to me that it is possible to survive when in one fell swoop, literally, everything is lost. It is just that, thereafter, the survivor is broken and lives on without sense or purpose, a cripple to himself, a cripple to the world.

I discharge myself from the house of the dead. As I entered it freely, I am entitled to do that. But I leave, more or less, unchanged. The fear that matters is still with me. My stay has been for me a great trial. The trial was one of my own choosing. But I was mistaken in considering it to be the trial of the last resort.

The next venue is the concert hall. There are no times given for commencements or endings. There are no set intervals either. There is only one performance but this performance is continuous. The programme is highly unpopular. Attendances are poor. The auditorium is sparsely populated. What audience there is, consists mostly of professionals or friends and relations of those present on the stage. The professionals listen with critical ears, to enhance their knowledge, to confirm their beliefs. Friends and relations are here from a sense of duty and come to lend moral support.

Beds are the only props permitted on the stage. There is no scenery at all. In a variety of changing poses, performers are performing whilst confined to beds. There is a bed for each performer and one additional, empty bed. Performers never change beds, the empty bed is waiting for a guest artist, a star of some repute, or so I am told.

Judging by the extreme contortions of the bodies and the tortured sounds that emanate, it seems unlikely that the orchestra is playing a well rehearsed score. The impression I get is that the agony is real and the men writhing on the beds are, one an all, dying in considerable pain.

As with any live performance, although the visual experience counts for something, we judge by what we hear. If the acoustics of the hall are nothing remarkable, the sheer quality of the sound generated on the stage takes my breath away. The sighs, varied in style and manner, are long drawn out, as if meant to last forever. Groans descend in fractured octaves to echo depths of black despair. Murmurs, mumbles, moans, form a continuous dismal discord of vocal accompaniment. Hisses end abruptly, or linger on

in a little, diminishing voice. A mournful air for gurgles, rattles and wheezes is being piped through tubes that have well nigh given up the ghost.

But it is the screams that are the most expressive. It is the screams that build tension and provide the approaching climax for every movement, for every piece played. There are whole scales of whines, of wails, of cries. Cries strangled in their infancy, cries piercing the ear, cries gathering volume, cries rising to a pitch beyond the tolerance of the human ear.

In the brief breaks between movements, looking around the auditorium, I have the occasion to realise that I am quite alone. I am a friend or a relation to no performer. I am not a professional come to observe, criticise and reinforce his dubious beliefs. Besides these interested parties, there is no one else here. Except me.

I cannot help overhearing the odd remark, brief comment, snatches of conversation, that fall between me and members of the audience sitting close by. I notice people turn their eyes in my direction, and on being met by mine, embarrassed, quickly turn them away. And when I happen to look behind my back, I always catch some pointing finger and the finger, invariably, points at me.

Even so, despite the warnings, I am shocked to see the conductor lower his baton, descend the stage and come to stand right in front of me. There seems no doubt in anybody's mind as to the identity of the guest artist, the highly rated, much expected soloist. The last empty bed on the stage has been reserved especially for me.

It would be possible, even prudent, I suppose, to refuse. There is, however, the clapping, the severe manner of the conductor, the dramatic anticipation of a critical audience. And I have not forgotten the lovely lady of youthful semblance, I have a good idea of why I am here.

Outwardly calm, inwardly shaking, I mount the few steps that lead to the platform where I sense an execution is about to take place. I undress, given that none of the performers wear any costumes. I get into the empty bed and, uttering no sound, moving no muscle, I lie absolutely still. I don't know what to do, I don't know what comes next. I am frozen. Being on stage, at the heart of the performance, the pain is reaching towards me through all my senses. I see the rolling eyeballs. The screams are deafening. The sweaty stench of tortured bodies is in my nostrils and gnaws at the back of my throat. I taste the suffering, I touch the agony, the pain is that close.

The pain is that close, but I, myself, feel not a thing. I search my body all over again and again. I am frozen with fear yet still have the will to let the pain come and let my performance begin. I lie there, centre stage, in a dual state. Terrified but ready to embrace the pain.

The pain does not come. There is no sign of it. Not even an incipient trace. After a prolonged, embarrassing pause, the conductor's baton is lowered for the last time.

The concert draws to a close. My performance, having never begun, is over. I proved to be a failure. A conspicuous flop.

The challenge was self inflicted. I was shown willing. The terror was authentic, the ordeal genuine enough. But once again, it wasn't what was wanted. There must surely be pain towards the end, but when it eventually comes, it will come of its own accord. It doesn't need prompting. So, with my ancient fear still embedded in my heart, I have to move on and follow the lady's trail.

On the way to the mortuary, I do the hospital rounds. Since every case is hopeless, there is no sense of urgency. But on account of the plague, things are done in a great hurry. Patients are wheeled in, bodies wheeled out. With the symptoms obvious, examinations are perfunctory. With no ready remedies, treatment is minimal. Without effective treatment, patients die frequently and fast. Their places are taken by new patients, the process is jerkily continuous. An early, silent film, shot in black and white.

Wards awash in sickly sweet disinfectant. White uniform. Measured concern. A practical tone of voice that strips away all dignity and demands unconditional surrender. A state of undress. The virulent stench of imminent death. The hospital is designed to serve as a perfect antechamber. With live tentacles reaching into my distant past, it offers a suitable terrain for yet another attempt, another encounter. But for such an attempt there has to be a doubt as to the final outcome. For fear to be acute, it must be wedded to hope, a hope that the worst will not happen. Here there is no such hope, the end is a foregone conclusion. So, as everyone else in this place, I hurry on. I am impelled by a fear that gives me no respite, a terror long neglected.

The mortuary forms an annex. It belongs to the hospital complex, but is loosely detached from the wards. It is a warehouse used for temporary storage of failures, failures best kept out of sight. Laid out in rows, on marble topped, steel framed tables, the bodies are in pristine condition. That is, they are freshly arrived, still warm, captured in the exact, final posture. No one has tempered with them, no one has tried yet to give them a more presentable form.

The plague has inscribed itself on its victims in a subtle variety of ways. Suppurating sores draw different patterns on diseased skins. Infected areas never overlap, the blues and purples of open flesh come in an assortment of shades. Marks of oozing blood, now coagulated, are not always traced to the same orifice. Mouth, nose, ear, eye, anal passage, any one of them may have been the treacherous source. Some hands have palms upturned in open supplication, fingers clasping at the empty air. Some hands make tight fists, desperate not to let go. Some hands gesture violently, pointing an accusing finger at someone absent in the hour of need. There are bodies sprawling in indecent abandon, others are curled up as if in a womb.

The dead have one thing in common. None of them died at peace, in his sleep, oblivious to the world. Their eyes are all open and they all have the very same look. Peering into each one closely, I see eye after eye staring with horror at nothing, as if finally, at the last moment, they realised there was nothing to see.

In normal circumstances no visitors are allowed. In normal circumstances entry is restricted to cleaners, porters and pathologists. Those whose business it is to deal in corpses, not in men who have just lost the only life they are ever likely to live. But these are not normal circumstances and I have been given spurious access to the mortuary. A dubious privilege, granted once in a lifetime. The next time here I will be one among these figures, lying exposed on a table, with the plague inscribed on my body and this specific horror staring out of eyes which are my own.

Since I have been a runner for so much of my life, always preferring to look the other way, the scene presents a nasty shock. I find very hard to take the sight of men so dreadfully reduced, their remains a tortured witness of my own inevitable future fate. But spending some time in such dismal company, I slowly emerge from the state of shock. The lack of any shift in posture, any change of expression, helps me to accept, against my better instincts, that the dead here are, for all intents and purposes, dead.

What haunts me still is the undefined horror I encounter in their wide open eyes. I know, because of what I have been taught ever since I began running, I know that this horror has to do with a moment which is final, the very last fraction of time. It may be that what they have glimpsed, these dying men about to die, was not a vision of their own favourite hell, or even the shadows, ill formed, of the great, terrifying unknown. Perhaps the horror set in those eyes is simply the perception of the moment itself as final. The end. The absence. The nothing more.

I stay in the presence of these eyes, in the mortuary, fighting a strong urge to flee. By just staying long enough, I want somehow to ensure that, on my turn, the same horror will not inhabit me. But of course, I am staring at these horror filled eyes from the wrong side. From where I stand, the lens magnifies the horror, distorts its image and turns it upside down. So no matter how long I stay here, the fear in my heart remains alive and does not release its icy grip.

When I leave this warehouse of failures, I leave once more a man unchanged. This ordeal was not the ordeal. This attempt was not the attempt. It wasn't what she, the lady of youthful semblance, must have meant.

After the mortuary there is only one place left to go. The cemetery which, advancing with the plague, has swallowed up more than half of the domain. The cemetery where the dead are buried. Where we are all bound to end our days. The final resting place.

I pass by the army of monumental masons. I have not yet earned the words to embellish a headstone worthy of a grave. I buy no flowers for myself, I hope to shed

no self pitying tears. I avoid the black horses, the black carriages, the mourners shrouded in professional grey. I have not come here to mourn for myself. I have not commissioned anyone else to mourn my untimely passing away.

But I do pause at rows of unseasoned coffins, hastily cobbled together to accommodate the deceased piling up. The coffin lids are not nailed down, although occupants lie, already mummified, within. There are no attendants about, no one to deter the curious, no one to guard against vandals and warn inadvertent disturbers of an eerie peace.

Choosing at random, I lift one of the lids. The body is wrapped in a white sheet. Only the bearded face is visible. The beard is almost white, the skin generally grey. A shade more grey than since I saw him last, on a visit to us, on my graduation day. They have smoothed away the careworn lines etched deep by ageing and slowly grinding pain. They have tightened up the cheeks and closed the eyelids down so that, to an observant child, the man appears peacefully asleep.

I touch the face I have kissed so often, ages and ages ago. It used to feel rough to my soft, unpractised lips, but full of warmth, setting me alight with glowing eyes of proud, parental joy. Now the face is smooth. Now the face is cold. But, all the same, it is still my grandfather's face, I have no doubt at all.

This is just what troubles me. The features are unmistakable, but something is missing, something is wrong. He who is in the coffin is my grandfather, he who is in the coffin is not. If he is not, who is in the coffin, and where has my grandfather gone? If he is, my grandfather has undergone a terrible transmutation and what we can expect next may be even worse.

Absent minded, I lift the lid of another coffin close by. Lying within, I see another shrouded figure, another bearded face of someone whose identity is severely in doubt. Is he or is he not an ancestor of mine, an ancestor worshipped in earlier days. I touch the cheeks, cold and smooth like the one before, and wonder off, still undecided, to lift more lids in a rambling search that has no object, no goal. With the lifting of each lid I find him lying there, my vagrant, troublesome, grandfather. A grandfather who refuses to leave.

From the coffins, unthinking, aimless, I make my way to their final destination. To the open, hungry, graves. By this time, without my noticing, sunset and dusk have come and gone, and now I am in darkness. But the darkness is not complete. In the stolen light of a pale, yellowing crescent of a moon, I can see the outline of an even ground lined with pits. Pits yawning in eager anticipation of bodies to come.

A moment's hesitation, to allow for the fierce clash within my divided selves. Then, all of a sudden, I find myself jumping down the first blind cavity I pass. There can be no justification for such a rash, impulsive act. There is no time in mid-air for

explanations, but in a flash I see invisible hands trying to hold me back, and I realise that I jump because I have to.

I land heavily, with a painful jar. I am not as light as a child, no longer as good at falling as a child is. Still, there is no injury, no bones are broken. I am just short of breath and a little shaken.

When I look up, I see an opaque, dark grey lightness above me. No moon, no stars, not even a suggestion of a sky, to mock me in its absence. For the rest, all of it is black. To get some bearings, I have to work with my fingers. The soil underneath is dry, sandy, stoneless. The walls on all sides are sheer, flat, without any purchase. They must be over eight feet since I cannot feel the top edge, standing on tip toes. The pit is rectangular. It is deep. It has been dug for a final, permanent location. It is not intended to be a place you leave. Ever.

My inability to climb out of the pit does not induce panic. At least not at once. But it does become a preoccupation. I keep telling myself there is no immediate danger. Come light, somebody will surely turn up, diggers will be at work near by, officials, in some capacity or other, will inspect the site, who knows how many funeral services are scheduled for the day, at any rate there will have to be activity over ground, and if I cry out loud enough, somewhere, somebody will heed me.

I keep telling and retelling myself these and other such future tales, to comfort myself and keep the rising fear at bay. But as I crouch in the corner of the pit, under a starless sky I cannot see, the cold and silent night brings with it visions that are ugly, ominous and frightening to me.

What if, before the working day begins, or even before dawn, as a matter of urgency, someone has to be laid to rest. And as luck would have it, the chosen grave is, unhappily, mine. What if, for reasons unknown, the interment is to be conducted at the dead of night, not just in great haste but also in sworn secrecy. And there is no ceremony, no mourners, no official of note, just the bare mechanicals who do not, or cannot, hear my screams.

What if there has been some mistake. An administrative error. And the pit into which I chose so inexplicably to jump was dug in the wrong place or should not have been dug at all. What if, this error has been discovered and is about to be put right. What if they have decided to fill in the pit, to obliterate all trace of a grave with me buried deep under.

Shivering in the cold and silent night at the bottom of a freshly dug, expectant grave, I await the arrival of the diggers. I listen for scraping sound of working shovels. I tense my back against sand and clay and clods of earth that are piled high, set to tumble. I move my limbs, they are still free. I clench and unclench my fist and feel the power in my fingers. There is no reason why, once the all that stuff starts falling in on

me and the pit begins to fill, there is no reason why I should not be able to keep on top of the mounting mound and claw my way to freedom.

Shivering in the cold and silent night at the bottom of a freshly dug, expectant grave, I wait for the earth to begin its move. I wait, at the same time, for the false dawn to announce the promise of another day. The earth doesn't move. No hint of light. Despite a growing sense of unease, I doze off. I slide in and out of sleep. The tension of waiting wears me out, my eyelids fall, I cannot keep alert.

In this state, not awake, not yet asleep, in but partial possession of my faculties, I become aware of things and happenings. Things and happenings which are inchoate, ambiguous and exceeding strange. Things and happenings I feel but cannot clearly see, which I see but fail to grasp, things and happenings that cannot be transcribed into words, at least not words of solid sense and clear meaning.

It feels heavy. The air itself has acquired substance. It weighs. It is oppressive. I sense it will be an effort to raise an arm, even before trying to raise it. An effort to shift a leg, to turn my head, even before trying.

I half raise an arm. Move a leg, turn my head a fraction. They are leaden. Something is holding them back. Something is holding me down.

I must move now, fast, before I lose all freedom of movement. I must get up, get away, while there is still some strength in my body. I drag myself up but cannot get beyond kneeling. My legs are trapped, or else they buckle, having lost the power to support me. I force my arms to reach out, seeking some fingerhold, to haul my body into an upright position. There are rough edges, shallow protrusions in the wall, but my fingers are limp and my body is too inert to be lifted.

I slump back, a heap of untimely exhaustion without a core, a lump with only an awareness of being trapped at its centre.

The trap is closing in. Need to get out. A rising urgency to escape.

Faster breathing. Loud heartbeats. Cold sweat. Shivers.

The sound of tumbling soil. Soft sand sliding. Clods of earth thudding down.

Tightness. Tightness all around the surface of my body. A heavy weight pressing down on my chest.

I can see nothing in the pitch dark. But I do feel myself being buried alive.

Terror.

My arms free themselves somehow, flail meaninglessly in the dank air, then fall back. My head is raised a fraction of an inch but my neck muscles cannot maintain it there. The rest of me is sealed under a blanket of dense sediment. The rest of me cannot budge.

The sweating is profuse. Cold, the sweat clings to my trembling skin. Shivers convulse my body in waves of erratic intensity. Each heartbeat is a separate beat onto

itself, drumming out a tattoo of panic. Breathing is frantic, the airways are about to be jammed.

The earth above is moving, relentlessly spilling its stifling substance into my grave. I am now encased in soil that holds me under and does not yield. I cannot flex a muscle, cannot command a finger to move. Only my face is not covered, only my face is exempt from paralysis.

So I still hear the sound of sods falling, I still smell the heavy clay soil, I still see the pale, grey light high above me, see it surely for the very last time.

And I still try to breathe. In quick gulps, I suck the remaining air into my lungs, frenzied to fill them to the brim. But the gulping is too quick. I have no time to let the stale air out. So no air can get in.

I am suffocating.

The lungs are hurting. A pale red mist sits on my eyes. Eyes bloated, flowing away. Eyes squeezed out of their sockets, forced out a throbbing head.

I have stopped breathing in and out. I am just holding the air in my lungs. I am holding onto this moment, trying keep away the next. For me there can be no next. This moment is to be my last.

The pain is unbearable, but the terror is even more acute than that.

A fall of loose, crumbling soil hits my face, forcing shut the eyes. As the eyelids close, I sense the presence of the ageless lady of youthful semblance who brought me to this pass. She is gone in an instant, but the words she once spoke to me on a memorable occasion, she leaves those words trailing in her wake.

“The secret is to desire what you most fear” This phrase keeps repeating itself, these words reverberate.

At the point of my passing out, that siren voice recalls the rest of what she said. The warning, the offer, the admonition, the deceptively simple, incomprehensible, tempting text. I see the words imprinted, I hear the voice recite:

“To save yourself you have to reach out into the future and bring the future back into the present time”

I see the words imprinted, I hear the voice recite:

“When you are afraid, time moves too fast. You want to slow it down. Terrified, you lose your head, hold your breath, trying to make it stop. To save yourself, when you are most afraid, when time is running out, you will not resist its advance, you will ease its passage, you will try to accelerate its terrifying course”

I see the words imprinted, I hear the voice recite:

“To reach the perfect calm of an unhurried evening, you will have to cross the unknown menace of midnight, to traverse it of your own free will”

I see the words imprinted, I hear the voice recite:

“To breathe free again, you must want to feel the fear you are most afraid of feeling. You must want it badly enough to bring it into the present, to let it come to pass right here, right now”

At the point of my passing out, I see these words imprinted, I hear that wonderful voice recite, and, suddenly, it all makes sense.

I want the earth to cave in. I want it to crush me. I want it to bury me alive. I long for the next moment. Let it be the last one. Let it happen. Let it be over. Once an for all.

I let the air out of my lungs. I let time move and bring with it the worst.

The earth keeps falling. It covers me. I am buried deep in my grave.

Lying deep beneath the soil, I am aware of breathing. Therefore I am not dead. The breathing is unhurried. It is surprisingly even, profound, calm.

The cavity in the earth I occupy fits my body to perfection. There isn't an inch to spare. But there is no pressure, nowhere does it feel too tight. It feels cosy, comfortable, warm.

No creatures burrowing underground, of ill repute and revolting in nature, come to disturb my peace. No sickening smells of decomposition foul the place of my final rest. No discordant screams penetrate my shelter. Silence reigns supreme.

This time I submitted myself to the right ordeal. The ordeal designed especially for me. I know because the fear that threatened to overwhelm my life, that visceral fear is gone. I am still frightened, of course, but now I know what frightens me.

It is not yet light but at long last, I am about to sink into the deepest, most peaceful sleep.

CHAPTER XXIX

TAKING LEAVE

In a coffin shaped glass container, aloft the shoulders of four sturdy men, my final journey has commenced.

The glass is made of some fancy new material, I see out, but no one can see in. To those we pass by, to those who care to look, the coffin appears in its customary black. They must all presume a corpse, not me, is riding within.

The men walk at a solemn, dignified pace. Their stride is even, their steps well aligned. My body is at no discomfort, my heart is not afraid. It is given that the men will not change direction, will not turn back. It is given that they will not stop at my behest, to lower the coffin, to lift the lid and let me step back into the world I leave behind. I am not to be granted a last minute reprieve. I am not allowed to repeat my life and make amends for the error of my ways.

Since the struggle is over and I am no longer banging my fists against the transparent walls of my fate, I have the leisure to observe the spectacle of life, knowing that each sight, each encounter is unique, the last one I'll ever have.

Being the final journey, they, who carry me, ought to be highly selective as to where we go, what we behold, who we chance to meet. I suppose these sturdy men are acquainted with my past and understand what matters now, otherwise why should they have been chosen, ahead of all the others, to be the pall bearers of my earthly remains.

We climb the hill, once a fort, that has protected the house from centuries of western winds. From the top, looking down the house where I have lived the later years of my life, I see a small gathering in the courtyard, a knot formed by a few grieving friends and my depleted family.

I am too far to see the tears, if any are shed. Too far to hear words exchanged, words that touch me, perhaps words spoken in my regard. I know the tense used is the past tense but I wonder if they are words I have heard before, if they are indulgent, respectful, revealing, flattering, insightful, if I would have considered them significant.

There are words I myself want to say, words right in such sad circumstance. Things I could not have said face to face when I still had hope, when I was still fighting for

my life. But what I want to say won't make any difference and, in any case, from where I am, my voice could never reach the ears of living men.

I did not build the house, I have merely carried out some works to bring it back nearer its original state. It has stood for four hundred years and perhaps for even longer than that. The window on the upper floor of the West wing corner is where I rest my eye. It is the window of my study, where I left behind most of myself. It stores possessions of a personal kind, of import to one owner, of little value second hand.

A ruler, a watch and some other minor relics of my father. Sealed documents with dated stamps, testifying to acquisition, bonding, travel and allegiance. Certificates of births, of examinations passed, of honourable discharge from wars suffered, of degrees bestowed by academic hands. Fading photographs of disappearing men, of feelings but vaguely retained, of singular moments of merely personal worth. Letters that once upon a time hurt, excited passions, disappointed, gratified, provoked anger, demanded thought.

Letters unanswered, issues unresolved.

Bits and pieces kept because I fancied they may one day be required to bear witness to a life of some importance, kept in the vague hope of inspiring me to greater things, kept because I never knew where to file them and could not bring myself to throw them clean away.

The contents of the room are not well ordered nor are they in total disarray. I always meant to have everything neatly labelled, correctly classified, but somehow never found the time to do the job. Or perhaps, it wasn't a question of priorities, of indolence, of time. Perhaps, I could not bear to parcel the few possessions that meant something to me for fear of wrapping up my life.

As it is, I have to think now of others entering that room, of opening a door and not finding me there. Those who come to perform a service, or come on a practical errand, may not notice my absence. Those who come for information or to seek advice, may be somewhat disappointed. It is the ones who love me, it is they who will find the room, whilst fully furnished, utterly bereft.

When I think of those who love me, and I count myself among them, I feel a sadness, a sadness akin to pain. For the room is very full and vastly empty. And we all understand that it shall never be the same again.

And looking from the hill down to the house the most acute pain I feel is that of one who had chosen to share my life. It is she who will remain alone in the old, deserted house. It is she who will hesitate to go into the rich emptiness of the abandoned room. It is she who, sooner or later, will have to open the door.

At first, and for some time to come, she will leave everything as it is, untouched. Occasionally, she will see that the room is dusted, the droppings of bats and the bodies of dead flies are removed. But that is all. Because moving any one thing may

inevitably mean going through everything to sort it all out. Because moving any one thing would break the spell of grief that, in hurting, protects the mourner from the arid fact. Because leaving the room untouched means that nothing has really changed and, against all conceivable odds, I might, just might, come back.

But the time will surely come for the room to be exorcised. It will not happen all at once, there will be no ceremony, no ritual, no attendant priest. I will linger on awhile, but she is not the kind of woman to let a mausoleum take over her home. The place she inhabits has to be vibrant. Everything in it has to work, everything has to make itself useful, has to contribute, to justify its existence, to earn its keep.

She is a woman of courage, given to incisive, impulsive moves. One fine morning, when it's not raining, when the sky is not grey, she will enter the room and throw the window open to the freshening winds. Moved by an exacting spirit, she will be determined to dislodge the sacrosanct presence of one who is dead but reluctant to leave. She will remove a chair needed in another wing of the house. She will clear the desk of papers which arrived too late, too close to the one deadline that could not be deferred. She will examine the bookcase as to which books have a general appeal and which too arcane, too specialised, to be of benefit to anyone else.

Little by little she will rearrange objects, separate that which is to go from that which is to stay. After a while she will steel herself and burn, gift away, get rid of things whose relevance, quite rightly, is past. In grief, badly hurt, sacrificing the shrine of our memories, I know she will, in time, succeed in bringing back to life a place occupied by a mere absence, no matter how precious.

Appropriately, my erstwhile study will be turned into a nursery, a playroom for grandchildren, some very much alive, others not yet born. Wild shrieks of laughter, excited whispers and the thud of romping feet will help carry my lifelong bride across the threshold of that memorable room with tolerable ease.

Even so, at some unexpected moments of the day, more often at night, as, in prayers, she prepares herself for sleep, I suspect I will be close by, close by and sorely missed. The vast emptiness will by then have shrunk to a manageable size. For she, my lifelong bride, is not only strong and brave and sustained by a flow of primeval love, she also has the skill of the alchemist to transform a base substance into pure nobility. And in this new guise, much slimmed down, distilled into an essence of her wise chemistry, I will be there to atone for my untimely death by providing a measure of comfort, advice and a raft of suitably slanted memories.

But all this is some way off. It takes time and grim determination to fill such a chasm of monumental emptiness. To turn the sudden onset of an unbearable loneliness into a dark grey sea of grief. To lighten that grey sadness into a dull ache that recedes into the liveable background of the everyday.

Right now, my bearers move relentlessly on. We crest the hill and I lose sight of the house. Right now all I want is to be back there, right by the poor love of my life, so that when her arm reaches out unthinkingly in the dark, there is someone there to touch and she does not wake with a start, to nurse a bleeding heart for the remainder of the night.

Right now I want is to help her over the first waves of early grief, when the loss is most acute, as she had held my hand in the hours of my most desperate need.

It cannot be. She is left standing alone on the tomb of her married life as my bearers carry me remorselessly away. We traverse a path through the woods that I used to walk nearly every day. Some of the trees, not many, are old. Chestnut, beech and ash, all substantial, vulnerable to storms, leaning slightly, reaching the end of their life. Their lineage reaches back to the primordial forest that once covered, undisturbed by man, the whole extent of this land.

Most of the trees, I am happy to say, are in their prime. Hemlock, spruce, cedar and other varieties of fir and pine. Of a lesser pedigree, they stand tall, erect. Swaying, they whisper into the singing wind their strong rooted self confidence. The needles they carelessly shed line the whole length of the path, cover the rocks and allow the firm ground to yield just enough to make each walking step a pleasant experience.

Here and there, we pass thickets of young oak I planted myself. They were little saplings, a foot or so, when I dug them in, a few winters back. The days were short and raw, I remember, the ground hard and covered with stones. They have done well, my little oaks, we have lost remarkably few. Now they are established, their trunks too thick to be grasped by a single hand, their branches nearly meeting each other above a shimmering purple cloud of sheltered bluebells.

I shall not be here to thin the woods, I shall not see these oaks mature into magnificent trees. Other men will walk in their shadow and feast their eyes on what once was part of me. Those walking these woods by then will not even recall my name. My coming absence hereabouts, strangely, does not unduly worry me. I am a little sad at the thought of never walking here amongst huge oak trees in time to come. Yet seeing them take root and gather growing strength feels especially good because I know that whatever I did, I did for their sake and not for me.

Still, leaving the woods for the very last time, it seems manifestly unfair for an oak to have a life span five or six times my own, when, year against year, I needed to accomplish so much more than any one of them.

So soon, so soon, we are out of the wood and past the few meadows that make up the rest of my modest estate. I had my eye on some fertile fields, one or two adjoining valleys but my neighbours, or their sons, have survived me and the boundaries of all I once did covet are now permanently set. The days of my acquisition are over, the time when I lose the little that I've got, has come.

To ease my sense of impending loss, I have taken steps, I have made predispositions. For some time now I have been in the habit of giving away things of value to those close to me, those I love. Mostly they, not just anybody, will inherit what's left. I vaguely thought such gifts would let me keep my possessions because the beneficiaries, through love bonds, are also mine. A misunderstanding. As my bearers march on and my domain, and all within it, recede into the distance, I am forced to concede that even those closest of all, those sharing my flesh and blood, no longer belong. And worse still, I will not be there to see if what I bequeathed them turns out to be a burden or a joy.

The sturdy men, on whose shoulders I am riding, have come to a halt. Maybe, they are in need of a rest. Maybe, random pauses are part of the pattern, to raise false hopes, to induce an expectation of what is plainly beyond the end.

As luck would have it, in this very spot, a game of chess is in progress. Two men, long standing opponents, are hunched over the board, oblivious to the world, oblivious to us.

Surveying the battle from on high, I see the position with exceeding clarity. Black is under pressure on all fronts. His queenside is undeveloped, his centre is weak, the king is vulnerable. His forces are teetering on the edge of imminent collapse. But, staring me in the face, there is a liberating move. A move to develop the queenside, to strengthen the centre, to save the black king. It is a move of pure genius. It has the power to transform with a single stroke the whole game.

But the man doesn't see the move. He has no inkling it's there. Anxious fingers are rubbing a ponderous forehead whilst the time on his clock is ticking away. I've got to make the move. The game is crying out for it. Forgetting myself, I reach out. My hand knocks against a glass wall. The bearers resume their tread, this is the final journey, games are no longer allowed.

In measured steps we are wending our way through the prosperous streets of a vaguely familiar city. It is late evening. There are no lamp posts, only the windows of generous, well lit rooms relieve the monochrome of unmitigated gloom. Peering through them, in passing, I glimpse moving images of life, the lives of others, unwinding without any apparent concern.

Beside the uncurtained window of a large, half furnished room, my bearers come to an abrupt halt. From floor to high ceiling, substantial books in fine, leather binding, line three of the four walls. An extensive desk, covered in pages of an uncorrected manuscript occupies the corner diagonally opposite the solitary door. On either side of the desk, an identical pair of armchairs. One for the occupant, the other for his visitors who are meant to appear in succession, one by one. Other than a number of subsidiary tables, laden with papers, some filed, some loose, and an antique bokhara carpet well worn, there isn't anything in the room of particular note.

The occupant, the permanent occupant of the room, is a man well into his fifties. He walks up and down, opens and shuts books, sits by his desk, scribbles a few words, gets up to pace the floor. Every so often, there is a knock on the door. A visitor enters and is, invariably, invited in. Although varied in shape, condition and relative eloquence of speech, they are all confused, troubled, and, to some degree, in need.

Each one of them has a tale to tell. Each one of them, a subject to discuss, a request to make, an important question to ask. What they bring, and they themselves, are of obvious interest. They are all treated with politeness, cross examined, illuminated, instructed and sent with greater purpose on their way.

Watching the man sit in audience at his desk, it is obvious that he is absorbed by the business at hand. He enjoys the power he wields, the insight he displays, the clarity of his own thought, the respect he is held in by each departing, satisfied guest.

But each visit is an interruption, each visitor a distraction, each business uses up a great deal of time. And I know, better than the man in that room, how little time he has left. The manuscript on the desk is unfinished, the papers scattered over the tables are mere scribbles, if not altogether blank. The work still to be done is immense. I find myself shouting, screaming at the top of my voice:

“Stop, for heaven’s sake, stop. You have to give up all this trivial business. You have to give it up before it’s too late. It is time to get down to work, the work that matters, the work that cannot wait.”

The words bounce off the glass, reverberate within the walls and die away inside the space to which I am now confined. The man in the room doesn’t heed them, he goes on attending people, goes on in his mundane ways. He is constantly interrupted, which is a pity because the scribbled notes already contain the whole of the Truth.

So we resume my final journey, leaving behind a promising manuscript of a permanently unfinished kind. I must resign myself to never having known the Truth, to never having grasped the Meaning of Life. This may be of no great account for other men, but for me, having sought these eternal verities doggedly from the outset, for me, this near miss is a cruel disappointment.

Out of the city, not in the countryside, passed the suburbs, in a landscape of harsh realities, I am carried, on the shoulders of four sturdy men, into the heart of a battlefield. A young, seasoned warrior is leading a band of his followers against a larger, better armed force. He is squat, powerfully built, has a commanding presence, inspires allegiance, is a born leader of men.

Ranged against him, an amorphous coalition of armies, led, in hierarchical units, by a number of weak, indecisive heads. The enemy troops are heavily armoured, they are equipped with sophisticated gear. Decisions are taken in council, communication

lines are ragged, confusion is rife, movement laborious and slow. Still, they have superior weapons and their numbers are overwhelmingly great.

The young, seasoned warrior is impulsive, resourceful, brave. He moves swiftly, strikes in unexpected quarters, at unseasonable times. With guile, with invention, he wins some of the battles and in those he loses, his casualties are light. And this is vital, for he is heavily outnumbered and cannot afford to bleed his men. The weapons at his disposal are forged by hand, well worn, battle hardened. But they are somewhat outmoded, which isn't surprising since they are old family heirlooms he has inherited from me. For the young, seasoned warrior is my son. The one who succeeds me. The one who carries my name.

He is defending a patchwork of high ground I've conquered and marked out as our rightful terrain. Until yesterday we've struggled shoulder to shoulder, now my son is on his own. Given the choice, I would have preferred to have fought on a while longer, though towards the end my arms were getting weak and I could scarcely keep up with the others at the front. But even from the home base, my presence, my past reputation, my distant vision, counted for something. I was still of some use in the overall scheme of the war.

In the aftermath of a luckless battle, with eyes misted in pain, we shed in brotherly love the same bitter tears of defeat. After returning triumphant from an audacious sortie, we both drank from the same cup the distilled elation of an unhoped for, magnificent win. And before battle was even joined, the two us dreamt, plotted, contrived together a wondrous future to be.

Now that future for me is but a dying wish, my son has to wage our war single handed. When he cries, no one will see it. When he gains another precious foothold, no one will truly understand the enormity of his deed. When weariness threatens to overcome him, as from time to time it surely must, who will be there to support his tiring purpose, lift his gaze, brighten the horizon?

We are leaving the heart of the battlefield. My bearers have a time table which is obviously strict. Looking back from the growing distance, I still see clearly the squat, fighting figure engulfed in a swaying, milling multitude of confused hostilities. Every so often, he stops in his tracks, seems to look about, as if expecting to see someone. Someone who is never there.

I tell my son that I am so sorry, so terribly sorry to have left the field. To have, at long last, given up the fight. I tell him he is bright, he will learn quickly not to miss me. I tell him he will manage brilliantly on his own. I tell him he will, in time, get used to the lonely combat. The lonely combat that befalls us all.

Alas, he cannot hear me. But maybe he is aware that, beyond the outmoded weapons, beyond the family heirlooms, I did leave him something that he can use in

the last resort, something that he already has, something that I inherited and passed effortlessly on.

With the battlefield out of sight, we pass by a naked couple. They are extremes. They are intertwined. He is hard, angular, in the prime of his life. She is created in a multiplicity of curves. Each curve ripe for distortion, each curve, when distorted, retaining its god given form. Moist, melting in anticipation, she waits. With a controlled violence, set to erupt, he moves. They are extremes, there is nothing in common between them, yet, at this singular moment, they are one inseparable beast.

He sees nothing but her incandescent face. Hears nothing but the agonised notes of a tortured, high pitched song. Feels nothing but soft, resilient, flesh giving, yielding, dancing under duress. She is wound round a hard, inflexible core, which keeps moving in tantalising strokes, deeper and deeper within her to fill a hollow she never knew was there. It moves and burns everything within her, until there is only a searing torch of pleasure impossible to endure.

The only shred he retains of himself against the rising frenzy, is the will to exercise control. With fanatical concentration he rations the brutal incursion, keeping his rod erect and still, letting it move just enough to keep the beast they are, teetering on the brink. She has given up her nails, they dig trenches in his skin. Her teeth are buried in folds of flesh, she's unconcerned with his pain.

They are driven with ferocious intensity towards a peak of sensual obliteration. They are driven not by love, not by lust, not by mutual comfort, not by a desperate need to clone themselves, not because they are bored and there is no better entertainment to be had. He and she are driven, because once upon a time they were one. Because they were torn apart. Because they are now doomed forever to attempt the impossible, to try to be one again.

Yet, for one singular moment, right in front of my eyes, they nearly succeed in doing just that. At the climax, as the beast is released, she is he and he is she and they are both part of the same being.

But after that moment is past, he shrinks back into himself, she expands into the vacant space and they are no longer extremes. Exhausted, grateful, tender, held together in each other's arms, they drift apart, each into a separate, selfish, existence.

He averts his eyes from the lush scenery of rotund flesh that sent him, so recently, into a state of incomprehensible madness. His hand is withdrawn from the warm velvet of her inner thigh, his attention wanders.

Absentmindedly, she strokes the hair on his chest, yawns and spreads out her wings to bring him, along with everything else in the place, under a vast, somnolent, all embracing shelter.

The scene is familiar to me, I have been here, or hereabouts, on some memorable, and umpteen forgettable, occasions. The lush curvature of twin lobes separated by a line leading straight to the hidden valley. A certain quality of flesh, at once limp, firm and heavy. A type of skin, soft, silky, of indescribable ripeness. Moist, palpitating lips. They have all conspired in one female body or another to entice me here every time I chanced upon her. And every time, trembling on the brink, in that singular moment, I felt surging through me the delusions of divine power.

But this visit tonight is very different from all the other nights of such wild, unbridled excitement. For tonight is positively the last virile performance. No more fucking, no more ecstasy for me. I have been summoned, with Moses, to Mount Nebo, to behold the promised land. To behold the promised land and to be told that I shall never have the privilege of living in it. It must have been hard for Moses to have the cup of well earned reward dashed from his lips. But then Moses had his God. He believed in promises. For me, lacking in his faith, it is a lot easier. I know for a fact that the promise contained in that singular moment, that promise, can never be kept.

So I leave the naked couple with a little regret, but no envy. I leave them to the proud, ferocious pleasures of their youth. Even if I could stay awhile and join them, it would serve no purpose, it would be of no significance. I have not explored all the variations on the theme, I have not been through all the possible permutations of the madness, but no matter. Passions ignite, flare fiercely, and burn themselves to ash. The flames, at their height, give off a fantastical light, but it's not light enough for the final revelation.

I do not think the four men on whose shoulder I ride, care one way or another. They may have derived a crude, vicarious pleasure from the spectacle we've just witnessed, but their step hasn't changed, it is as sedate, as measured as ever.

We are moving along a well known local lovers lane. My bearers have to be careful to avoid a multitude of dew eyed couples walking hand in hand, unaware of my cortege, oblivious altogether to what's going on around them. The lane winds its way between the waters of a clear, idyllic brook on one side and dense, discreet shrubbery on the other. Benches, at civilised intervals, provide props to help courting couples adopt a variety of intimate, conventional poses. Dusk, of course.

As the young lovers walk, and sit, and whisper commonplace secrets, as they exclude the world in a tight embrace that leaves no room for others, as they look deeply into each other's eye to seek their own magnified image, I am aware that momentous events are taking place. All along the lane quite ordinary humans are raised to goddesses, transformed into gods.

The work of transformation is going on apace. Wherever I look deft, sensitive fingers are at work. Their tips lightly stroke the nape of a neck, caress unblushing cheeks,

wonder over eyelids closed to protect eyes from seeing. They are busy perfecting physical features of idolised lovers lacking in some measure of charm, beauty and grace. I see hand squeezing hand, lips brush against skin, eyelashes touch each other to consecrate what was hitherto undistinguished, unremarked, profane.

I admire the arts employed in fashioning out of human beings, beings divine. It is practised in the weaving of a web of attributes so excessively fine that it is invisible to anyone who does not happen to be hopelessly in love. It is practised in radical surgery, to excise glaring frailties, obvious to any passer by.

Following faithfully the winding lane, encased in a glass coffin, I survey couple after courting couple, in worship at the altar of their own, unique romance. Sculpted in a tender caress, on a long forgotten bench. Meandering arm in arm. Leaning against the trunk of a tree set there to advertise carved initials of lovers past and display arrows that pierce sundry wooden hearts. Whatever they are up to, the paired lovers on this lovers lane, they are free of the niggling, daily, erosive presence of mortality. They are gods and goddesses, impervious to change, immune to reality. They have fallen under a spell cast by someone they have never met a long, long time ago.

A disturbance. Someone running, flying along the lane. In the wrong direction, towards where I am, against the general flow. She is not one half of a couple. She is alone. Her eyes are not misted over, they are not floating in a dreamy haze devoid of all realities, they are firmly set on someone way ahead of me. Someone she has clearly within her sights. One who I cannot, from my lofty carriage, see.

She is running the gauntlet of those already paired. She is brushing aside anyone who dares innocently stand in her way. She cannot be a native of this place. I am sure she comes from where I come from. She may have had something to do with me.

Possessed of no great beauty, of no heavenly voice, of no sweet, seductive movement, she carries within her something altogether more precious than all that. No one can resist her, the path before her is swept clear. Coming towards me I see a creature of marvellous imperfections, imperfections so cunningly balanced that beside her all the lovers of the lane turn into statues that recede into the background and compete in the margin with flowering shrubs.

So unlike the others, so free of celestial worship, so full of raw feeling, she is ready, in one act of surrender, to take and give her all. She has singled out her mate to be. She has chosen their joint destiny. There is one ultimate beneficiary. One who will receive her life. Her life in all its richness. No barter. No counting losses, no calculation of gains.

She is still running, flying towards me, she is bearing her heart as a gift. I look into the future, I look beyond me but cannot see any single man on his own, unattached, eligible and free.

And then, with a shudder, I realise she must be aiming for me. With all the might of innocence, with a passion that is too fiery to be reduced to mere love, she is about to hurl herself into an empty space where I once was, where she thinks I still ought to be.

“Oh no, oh no” I find myself shouting, straining to be heard through these infernal glass walls “no, no, don’t throw yourself into the arms of that man. The man is not there! He is long gone, disappeared, deserted his post. He didn’t wait, he was impatient to live another life, a life of less promise, of lesser dreams, of no risk.

There is no one left here to tame your passion, the heroes are now all in the past. There is no man big enough to accept so fierce a sacrifice. There is no man strong enough to live with a gift burning with so constant an intensity. No one of sufficient talent to create out your passion the magic life your generous desire deserves.

Slow down, stop running, for heaven’s sake do not take the flying leap. For once, in the distant past, I stood there, ignorant, arrogant, bracing myself against the force of your flight, taking, as my due, the gift of your life. Now that I am elsewhere, on my last journey sedately in progress, after a lifetime of little accomplishment, now I see the enormity of just what was on offer. Please, please believe me, I am no longer there to take you in my arms, to bless the sacrifice. My erstwhile place is vacant and, from my elevated position, I do not see anyone else, anyone at all, equal to the task.

I beg you. Pause. Pause in mid flight. Stay as you are. Stay poised, eyes sparkling, heart aflame. Stay poised to move, and never even dream of moving. For throwing yourself with complete abandon into the arms of a nobody, is a terrible risk. I know you are ready to suffer, but I cannot bear to watch you dying a slow, grey, daily, meaningless death.

There is no indication that my words have reached her ears. And even if she did hear what I said, even if she listened to my pleading, what chance is there that, in her passionate flight, she would heed my warning? What chance is there, committed as she is, for her to pause in mid flight, to hover, and wait for another, a better man, a man cut out for greatness?

Fortunately, the question will never be answered. For I have to leave her now, just so poised, the four sturdy men are on another tack, the lovers lane is well and truly behind us. That pulsating surge, the inspired move, the abandoned pose, the touching beauty of so many wonderful imperfections is the last glimpse of her I am permitted.

The substantial medieval walls, the steep roofs layered with dormer windows, the preponderance of young men and women meandering in animated groups with no particular occupation, makes it obvious we are traversing a university town, a respectable seat of promiscuous learning. My bearers, for reasons I no longer ask, have stopped and deposited me on the cobbled stones of the town’s main square.

Even so, even from my lowly position, I have a reasonable view of the goings on here. The presence of the four sturdy men guarding a black coffin, presents something of a spectacle. Because they are young, or because they are idle, or perhaps being unaccustomed to the abrupt termination of life, the students do not just pass us by. They look, linger, congregate, pass comment. They point fingers, expostulate and argue before passing on to debate the next item on their frivolous agenda.

In my lamentable state I have quite forgotten that death and its appurtenances, invariably elicit unease, cast ugly shadows. People avert their eyes, cross themselves, hurry away. Or else they stand their ground and seek some kind of confrontation. Old scholars, afraid, are circumspect. They consider death with gravity and write a learned treatise. Young ones, such as stand above me now, are also afraid, but they make a show of despising death and treat it with defiance.

I see brave masks put on a variety of weary, hostile, suspicious, frightened faces. I hear a confusion of insecure voices. They query who I might have been. Someone of substance, important, or a poor sod of no importance. They are divided, are set to lay bets, bets which can never be settled because, to all questions asked, my bearers remain steadfastly silent.

I overhear remarks about coffins, funerals, outlandish ways of disposing corpses. Some begrudge a grave's allotted ground, given the overcrowded conditions. Others question the extensive use of black, the need for sombre celebrations. There are advocates of open pyres, of chambers of complete, utter incineration. And there are jokes. Jokes on the subject of dying and death, uttered with childish disdain, which leave a bad taste in the mouth especially for someone in my own current situation.

But then I notice two individuals, standing close to each other, some distance apart. They are students too, but of a much older vintage. They do not drift, do not congregate, do not mix. They move with some purpose, against the general trend. Given the intimacy of the exchanges, the ferocity with which regular words are attacked and assigned extraordinary meaning, given the latitude allowed to wild exaggeration, they must be old friends.

As friends, they are willing to trade secrets. As friends, they are ready to endorse and embroider each other's unlikely claims. As friends, they compete with each other for respect, recognition and every passing female fancy. But the friendship they partake in is no ordinary friendship. It is more of a conspiracy. A conspiracy against the established order of all things. It seems that the conspiracy has been alive for some time. The two friends have walked their revolution through the streets of this town on nights of profound verbal intercourse and on lazy days stolen from the university.

Being a much travelled man at the very end of his life, I know full well that the cobbled streets of this ancient town, throughout the ages, have echoed to the trumpets

of a host of imminent revolutions, each one proclaimed in a crescendo of confident sounds. Revolutions still born, dissolved in the words of their conception, abandoned before they were ever begun. Revolutions dreamt up by students as part and parcel of the unwritten curriculum.

The revolution in the making here, between these friends, is of a more serious sort. The two friends are a breed apart. They are cast altogether in a much sterner mould. As in all revolution, icons have to be destroyed. As in all revolution, entrenched beliefs will be uprooted. As in all revolution, institutions will have to disappear. But all that is by the way. All that is not what inspires their move.

It is obvious to me that the two young men, are not members of the congregation. They have ability. They have vision, although they cannot depict as yet exactly what they see. They have ideas. Ideas of some originality. But these ideas are more to do with what's wrong, than with illuminating the vast expanse of what might be. They have a thirst for knowledge, without knowing what precisely they can afford to ignore. They have drive, dogged perseverance, and the arrogance entwined in the single minded pursuit of remote glory, unlikely fame.

In a sort of permanent conclave, at this early stage of the revolution, the two friends are struggling to define their terms. All kinds of terms. Terms of reference. Terms of discourse. Terms on which to accept the world's eventual surrender. Terms to evaluate such things as Truth, Beauty and the ultimate Destiny of Man. Terms to segment the movement and decide what comes first and what will come to pass only at the end.

Being a mute, unwitnessed third party, I cannot help but be impressed by the scope of their conspiracy. It ranges from matters of the moment to issues of universal relevance. They debate where and when to meet next, and the validity of the Laws of Reason, with equal severity. Each holds fast to his stated position with the same intricate obstinacy, be the subject the sexual proclivities of a mistress or the alleged shallowness of one of the eternal verities.

At the same time, inflexible, argumentative, competitive as they are, each friend is elevated by his friend to a position of a relatively higher authority. And speaking with the voice of such superior authority, friend confers upon friend yet additional powers. Powers to transform, to distort, to judge mundane reality. Thus, while the conspiracy spreads, the conspirators keep growing in stature, gaining in recognition, in respect and in ambition to attain immortality.

From what I gather, in the brief duration of our lopsided encounter, these two young men are to be engaged, at the core of the conspiracy, in the constructing of a masterpiece. Maybe even more than one. Maybe a whole magnificent series of them.

As I understand it, each masterpiece is to be fashioned out of an array of precious elements. Images of undeniable beauty. Exquisite axioms. Poignant truths. Self

revealing insights. The seductive, self evident, music of poetry. Indelible lines, drawn on canvas, on paper and on hearts of men. Lines that describe accurately the essence of reality. A single idea, so vast that it contains the known and the unknown with equal certainty. Dazzling colours of a luminosity to hurt the naked eye. Tears of sheer transparency. The tragic, the comic, the destiny of the Universe. The sad fate of those never destined to be.

As I understand it, each masterpiece, once completed, will exist in splendid isolation, all on its own. Nothing, produced thus far in its sphere, will bear comparison. Each masterpiece, once completed, will set new standards, change perceptions, stretch the limits of its medium to the ultimate. Each masterpiece, once completed, will be a revelation, and lead to the true culmination of the original conspiracy.

As I understand it, no precise date has been set, so far, by the two friends for the completion of the first masterpiece. They do not know just how arduous the actual work of completion will be. They do not care to know just how long it will take. They keep themselves marvellously unacquainted with the hazards, the sacrifices, the dangers, the distractions strewn with malice aforethought all along the way.

I, on my final journey, lying in my lowly position, am only too familiar with the troubled future. I can surmise what awaits the two friends, I see the obscure shadows cast over their overexposed enterprise.

Prominent in those obscure shadows, towering behind the two innocent conspirators, looms a figure swathed in mystery. She moves in and out of the shadows and with every move her appearance takes another turn. She has many a face, wonderful variety of expressions, an endless diversity of highly deceptive forms. Yet, through all her perambulations, she is true to herself. For wherever there is a conspiracy, betrayal has to be there as well. She has come to tempt them. To make them betray each other, to betray themselves, to betray their own conspiracy.

She will accompany them in love affairs, in their perennial search for gold. She will reinforce family bonds, make fast tribal allegiance, weaken the innate selfishness which is so imperative to the cause. She will weave a spider web of useful, transitory relationships. She will excite idle curiosity, lead them into adventures which are irrelevant, exhaust their energies in a myriad of futile exercises, discourage them when they are tired, depressed, worn out by years of detailed, unrewarded work.

Although the malignant figure is right by them, at the very heart of the conspiracy, the two friends are unaware of her presence. They are ignorant of the countless convoluted forms betrayal can take.

I am touched by the ardour of the friendship, deeply moved by the sheer quality of the conspiracy, I want to embrace the young men and confess. Confess to a lifelong list of betrayals, committed in negligence, without provocation, entirely on my own.

And the excuse that mainly I betrayed myself, is no excuse at all.

Having confessed, I want to tell my friends that through all the betrayals to come, and they will come in hosts, what matters in the end is simply loyalty. Loyalty to friend, to oneself and to the forlorn, improbable cause. The kind of quiet, tenacious loyalty that survives the most prolonged, most insidious of drifts. The kind of loyalty between past and future that keeps alive a vulnerable, flickering, but ever present faith.

I want to tell them that, not because my words may change the course of their lives, it's unlikely they could. I want to tell them that because the matter is weighing heavy on my heart and I do not want to take it with me to my grave.

I want to tell all that, and a lot more besides, but I cannot. It is too late. The coffin is lifted, my pall bearers resume their slow march, once more we are on our wretched way. I shall not see the first masterpiece created. I shall not know the fate of the conspiracy. I shall not meet such friends ever again.

I am taken through a large, well tended park where all the paths are clearly defined, where forest trees are marshalled into avenues, where flower beds are set into symmetrical patterns and the shrubs are pruned into decorative shapes. We must be within the grounds of a historic mansion, a mansion of which there is no trace.

Where the mansion once might have been, there is now a hint of an open air theatre, with a raised platform for a stage, a partly sunken well for an orchestra and garden furniture set in a semicircle for an audience that is, for the time being, not there.

The music, on the other hand, is vibrant, melodious, with a strong beat composed for dance. A dance that right now is being performed, on stage, by classical dancers of a very young age. The performers are all girls, girls who have failed as yet to reach the age of puberty.

I notice nothing unusual, outstanding, fabulous in the performance, the dancers, the choreography. The overall quality is good enough not to call attention to itself. There is one feature that is out of the ordinary. The dancing girls are dancing slightly off the floor, they seem to defy gravity, they appear not to have substance, at least not substance that has any weight.

All the dancers partake of this strange, unearthly attribute but one among them much more so than the others. The tips of her pointed toes never touch the ground even though she covers the whole stage in arabesque, bourre, pose and every other kind of step. Her arms have the allure of wings that need barely flap to maintain height, poise and position. The torso, twisted, straight or bent, is suspended in mid air, the head turned always upwards, the eyes seeking something I cannot see, something in the very far distance.

Of course she is full of grace, of course she is radiant, of course I am enraptured. The dancing nymph is dancing for me, she is my darling daughter. I am so deeply proud, so humbly grateful to have been given such a gift, a gift so unexpected.

Being a family affair, I have seen from within what it has cost her to become airborne, to become a nymph, to be a dancer. I have audited daily her accounts. Itemised the tears, the sweat, the painful sculpting of the flesh, the endless schooling of each and every muscle. I have logged the passion, recorded all the torture. I have lived through the minor triumphs and cruel disappointments of a childhood so dedicated, so precise that it left the child captured in the past. I have watched her minute, cumulative efforts at perfection and I can honestly say I have seen no one so steadfast in purpose, so true to her own adopted star.

Yet now that I am seeing my nymph dance for the very last time, now that I am about to abandon my child on a nebulous stage of a theatre entirely deserted, I am gravely disconcerted. For I know for sure, in my own mind, that she will not be able to dance away the rest of her life, on the tips of her toes, floating on a cushion of ethereal air, free of the pull of the earth, for ever and ever.

The time will come, and I can sense it coming, when her feet, like the feet of all little girls, will have to travel on the hard surface of an unforgiving ground. The time when, to stay aloft for a moment, she will have to hop, to skip, to take risky jumps, to be content with mere climbing. The time will come, and I see it coming, when she will no longer have the power to reach for the skies, when, in my lamentable absence, someone else will have to lift her up, lift her up and send her, once more, flying.

And what concerns me most in that event, is the fate of that isolated child, gone missing from her childhood, that unprotected heart, that flow of feeling, that simple belief in an improbable life, that has sustained her flight, and made her into a dancer.

I hope and pray. Hope and pray, that's all I can do, enclosed as I am, in my glass walled cabin. I hope when that day comes, when she first bleeds and the blood stains indelibly the blank sheets of perfection, I hope a woman will emerge, a woman capable of living in this messy world of jerky, truncated steps, fragmented days and a light so inferior that it only admits such perfections as have no meaning.

I hope the woman to come will be allowed to meet the child left so far behind. I hope she will be sensible enough to lead that child by the hand through the shard-strewn streets of shattered stained glass windows. The windows through which angels, beasts and heroes of mythical proportion used to make their regular appearance. Those shards of broken dreams are particularly sharp and could so easily damage the feet of a child and forever deprive her of walking.

If the woman is careful and brave, if the child is not too badly wounded by the jagged edges of her broken angels, beasts and heroes, all may still be well. The two of them may cleave one to another, and become inseparable, lifelong companions.

And I pray, if this should come to pass, that, in my absence, someone will materialise just at the right moment of time, to lift them both into his arms, someone with

love enough not to break an unprotected heart, someone strong enough to undam that torrent of turbulent feeling, someone with imagination enough to cherish the memories of all her days of dancing.

Alone with my prayers, such as they are, I am carried away by the four sturdy men, away from the stately park, away from the stage, away from my little dancer. She is unaware of me abandoning her thus, which is just as well. She is not used to seeing tears in my eyes and they may surprise her.

Our progress has slowed somewhat, we are climbing. In high mountain ranges, well above the snow line, we are passing by frozen lakes of brightly coloured skating figures, well wrapped up, gliding unconcerned on solid ice. Patient lines of men, women, girls and boys, in a holiday mode, lean nonchalantly against well waxed skis, waiting for the arrival of a cable car, to waft them to the top, no effort required. Further up, with my bearers trudging knee deep in the snow, skiers on their stylish, elegant descent, swerve to avoid our strange cortege, without wondering what a coffin is doing up here, above the last human shelter, above the tracks of the rare mountain goat.

When we eventually reach the peak, I realise that this is not the peak, there are still other peaks beyond it. With some peaks unclimbed ahead still, on the north face of a vertiginous, rocky mountain, we come across a solitary man. The crowds are far away, the shadows are long, there is just one predatory bird circling in the far distance and even that bird is silent.

The man is on skis. He stands, hands on sticks, surveying the silence. Above and below him, deep virgin powder snow. No ski tracks are visible, I cannot make out how he's got here. And having got here, I do not see how he is going to get down. The face of the mountain is extremely narrow, pockmarked by islands of volcanic rock rising menacingly above the snow. On either side ravines of deadly depth. The slope to which we are clinging is so severe that no fall, of stone, of frozen snow, of man, can be arrested. Whatever falls, just goes on falling all the way down, down to the floor of a hidden valley.

My bearers, sturdy and indefatigable though they be, are struggling. Waist deep in snow, with the weight of an inhabited coffin on their shoulders, fighting for every foothold, they find it hard to gain any height. The lone skier is still a fair distance above us, and although he is not wearing goggles, he's too remote for me to distinguish the salient features of his face.

Then, with no undue haste, using his sticks, the man above me levers his skis out of the snow and launches himself into a spectacular descent. The line of the descent is virtually perpendicular. If unchecked, the sheer accelerating speed in a straight line would catapult the skier into the air, and send him crashing. So he has to break

and bend the line. Risking frequent turns, he has to modulate it into waves of gentle curves, safe and slow and easy on the eye.

The turns are all that matters, his life depends on them. Each one demands a sudden change of direction. A complete shift of weight from the right leg to the left one or the other way around. A reversal of arms and shoulders, one side heading into the turn, the other leading out of it. All these movements are intertwined. All of them have to be executed at the same instant, accomplished in perfect harmony. Otherwise the skier will lose balance, fall, hurtle into the rocks, plunge down a ravine, buried alive under snows that melt late in the spring.

The lone skier performs his turns with fine precision. His skis leave behind a single trace of identical, undulating waves. The whole descent is one fluent, serene, rhythmic motion, carved into a white wilderness of beautiful, blinding, treacherous snow.

Just as he is about to pass us by, in a spray of icy crystals, the skier breaks sharply and comes to an abrupt stop. He is standing right opposite me, hardly out of breath, at eye level. I have no difficulty in recognising him. He bears an uncanny resemblance to my brother, a younger brother to me.

He takes a good look at the coffin, examines in turn the four sturdy men on whose shoulder it rests. I have no idea whether he knows or just guesses whose funeral this is. At any rate, his eyes are clear, the features of his face altogether relaxed, when he makes the following unprompted statement:

“Of course I realise how dangerous it is. I know one slip is all it takes, I have measured the risks. I have rehearsed the turns ten thousand times, I have double checked the bindings, I am supremely fit. I very seldom get tired.

I don’t want to die. On the contrary, I like very much being alive. That’s the whole beauty of the setting, that’s why I come here. When the conditions are right there is no better place to lay my life on the line, nothing comes near it.

Am I afraid? Sure, I’m afraid. No matter how skilled one is, there is always the chance of something going wrong, something unexpected. At the top, looking down, my knees are weak. At every turn, my heart beats a touch faster. The fear is at the core of the thrill. It brings the challenge alive. Without it the game isn’t worth the candle.”

Having had his say, with a characteristic smile on his lips, he launches himself anew to weave his way down in graceful arcs, sweeping all danger before him. I, on the other hand, stay cramped in my coffin, pondering how two brothers, sons of the same father can be so utterly unlike each other. In my time, I also skated on thin ice, I also descended on perilously steep gorges. But my fear was not his fear, it never went the full distance. And even when I got carried away in the thrill of the moment, a residual fear was always there to make me proceed in moves of cautious abandon.

As I see the gliding figure disappear into the snowy vastness, I have a sense of regret. I would have so wished to step outside into the snow, to hold him tight one last time, and tell him, that being the brave coward that I am, how much his kind of courage has, in the last difficult years of my life, how much it has helped to sustain me.

The four sturdy men, with me on their back, struggle on, sinking deeper and deeper into the snow. They are gaining no height, but it no longer matters. The sun is burning fiercely in a blue sky, the great thaw has begun, winter is over. In next to no time, the pearly heads of snowdrops appear, all of them set on green shoots, emerging from little pools of pale cover. Soon enough we are out of the snow altogether, our forlorn way crossing the high mountain meadows of a glorious spring.

Surprisingly, even in my sealed container I can smell the distinct scent of freshness in the air. I know not how it's manufactured, what the precise ingredients are, but it is there to be sensed only once in every year. An early morning, when the grass is still tender, when the buds break into blossom, when the bees are flying their very first sorties, when the unseen worms have reawakened and have just begun once more their interminable, subterranean dig. It is a sort of anniversary, to celebrate the birth of someone who has always been alive, died, and is, at this very moment, born anew.

This scent, which is the essence of freshness has, in the past, made me fill my lungs with huge chunks of air and sent me forth drunk, intoxicated with raw ambition. It signalled a brand new beginning with everything still possible, with nothing out of my phenomenal reach. Now, as we cross the high meadows in the setting of a glorious spring, the scent is the same exciting scent but there is barely enough air in the coffin to let me breathe freely. No new beginning, not much is possible any more, everything worthwhile in the world reborn is out of my reach forever.

The figure sitting on a tree stump, in middle of a field of wild flowers, has its back to me. From where we are coming I cannot see whose figure it is. Approaching closer, the nape of the neck, the tilt of the head, and the rich, dark hair flowing over the shoulders, calls to mind someone who I have carried in my heart for I do not know how long, someone I had once lost, found again, someone from who it will be especially painful for me to be irrevocably parted.

Drawing abreast, my bearers have slowed their steps. We round the tree stump in slow motion. I am unaware of the changing distance, we are all part of a scene that is utterly beautiful, and quite still in its perfection.

She, herself, poised on the memorial of a once mighty tree, floating in a sea of wild flowers, on this last glorious spring morning of my life, is both a girl and a woman. Such creatures are exceeding rare. Quite unlike the common variety of teenager, awkward in shape and form, bereft of innocent charm and not yet sufficient to be a woman.

The singular features of her face, the graceful coherence of her body, are too precious, too intimate to be rendered in words. I want to let my eyes rest on them one last time undisturbed and take her retained image, as an icon, on this last journey, with me.

She is talking in her husky, melodious voice, a voice surprising in a youngster. She is talking to the wild flowers listening spellbound in the field, in a language plain for all, easy for them to understand.

She addresses one flower at a time, although what she has to say seems to attract the attention of everyone around. She takes good care to call every flower by her proper name and observe each detail of her nature. She takes account of the precise colour, shape of petal, height and strength of stem, state of the supporting leaf, density of surrounding population, proximity of family, enemy and friend.

She is chiding, she is praising. She is warning, comforting, soothing, alerting, explaining, demanding and accomplishing with words whatever words are capable of doing. From time to time, she falls silent and conveys her meaning by a prolonged, serious look. Most of the time, though, she is telling stories. Real stories. Stories about the fate that befalls flowers growing wild in the high meadows, just like the ones listening to her, right here and now.

The well of her stories never runs dry. One has hardly come to an end when a new one begins. Even though our dismal procession has ground to the slowest of crawls, I have enough time to listen to just one story. It is about a very special flower. I listen to her deep, melodious voice and hear the story told in these words precisely:

“She started growing up the same as all the other flowers. After the melting of the snows, with the earth getting warmer, she had to fight her way through the tangled roots of grass sprawling around her. Weak, tender as she then was, she had to keep her head up towards the light. For she knew, as all flowers know from birth, what light means for flowers.

It was not easy, the strands of grass were rough and tough, pushing and shoving and claiming for themselves every inch of space around. But little as she was, she was unafraid and very, very determined. Once she gained a tiny foothold, she would defend it with ferocious pride and never, never let go.

But she was not blind. She did not fight for fighting's sake. Sometimes, when the odds against her were too great, she would pretend to fall asleep, fool the encroaching grass, and find a way around, a way much more subtle. In her struggles up towards the light, she learnt the tricks of the surrounding greenery, their foibles, weaknesses and strengths, and altogether what they were up to. She had this knack, which few possess, of knowing what she wanted most, of knowing when and how to get it.

So the little flower grew in time, until, one fine day, her head reached above the grass and she could look around to see the whole wide meadow. A fresh breeze caressed

her face, grasshoppers leapt about, dragonflies swept by, bees came visiting, the sky was blue, the sun shone bright, birds were singing. And the flower, no longer so little, was enormously impressed by the world and moved by the beauty all around her.

Besides the visiting bees, the high flying birds and a variety of tiny insects too numerous to mention, she came slowly to know kindred wildflowers living in the same mountain meadow. Some appeared quite like her, some seemed more distant and some bore no resemblance to her whatever. Yet different though the flowers looked, they all acted in a similar fashion. Each one spent much of the time grooming herself. Adding colour and scent here and there, puffing up leaves, fluttering petals, each one competing, each one intent on outshining her rivals.

When one flower displayed a new shade of blue, or yellow, or purple, those near by would notice at once and try to copy that exact colour. The same with scent. A novel variation would set a new trend and spread through the field like wildfire.

The brave little flower, now fully grown, was not interested in this kind of competition. She had a special beauty of her own, of which she was unaware, never mind comparing it to the beauty of others. She was puzzled by this endless striving to look and smell ever more beautiful by the entire flowering population. Especially as she observed that there came a moment in each flower's life when, despite all her efforts, the colours began to fade, the scent got weaker, the leaves started to droop and the petals looked tired. And she could not fail to see that, from then on, every single flower suffered pain, became afraid, sad, and desperately unhappy.

She could not help noticing, observant as she was, that at the heart of every wildflower's life a cruel disappointment lay in waiting. At the perfect moment of their blooming, at the height of their beauty, when their scent was at its most seductive, nobody was there to swoon in admiration, no one to witness the sight, no one to hold it in a memory of undying affection.

She often wondered why flowers strove so hard to appear at their very best. She wondered for what, for whom they were waiting. She asked the visiting bees if they knew, but the bees just took her nectar, flew back to the hive, and never gave any answer. She questioned the high flying birds who could view the whole mountain from above. But the birds paid no attention to flowers. They kept their eyes peeled for insects, and the insects, in their turn, gossiped about everything under the sun but understood nothing of any importance.

So, with no one to help her, the bemused flower had to work out for herself why she was there, what to make of her life, how best to use time, time given without obligation, time freely available. She had to teach herself the questions too troublesome to ask, and learn by heart those to which there were no answers.

So, when her great moment arrived, and she was in full bloom, she did not expect anyone to come and feast on her beauty. She knew she was not born for the sake of someone else. She was not there to decorate the meadow or to please the fancy of an eye absent forever. By then, she understood full well that the whole meadow was hers to have but only she alone could make it the substance of a lifelong entertainment.

So, when that moment came and passed, with leaves drooping, colours fading, petals falling off one by one, she could endure the pain, she was not afraid, she was not desperately unhappy.

And when this very special flower, so brave, so wise, finally withered away, in the place where she was born, she died content even though she knew no one would ever mourn her.”

As the tale, so movingly told, draws to a close and that husky, melodious voice falls silent, I think I can see tears on the faces of the wildflowers around, unless I am mistaken and they are dew drops collected at dawn and kept in suspense by the compelling power of the story.

I pray, quite unashamed, for my bearers to halt this melancholy procession. I want to linger on, in this high meadow, on a glorious spring morning, listening to a sweet, melodious voice recounting this tale, and thousands like it, forever.

My prayers, of course, are unheeded. We are continuing our way, at an agonising slow pace, leaving the figure seated on the tree stump, receding sadly in the distance. As I look back on the serene face, the expressive eyes, the gently moving lips, for the very last time, no words come to mind, no words appropriate for the occasion.

No words, that is to say, that I have not said to her before, in the course of our long, intimate, kinship. No words of poetic force which could ease my pain of our parting.

No words of wisdom to comfort her, or me, or our unlive, entwined ambitions. Certainly no last words of friendly warning to incline the course of her life, ever so slightly, one way or another.

This lack of words is a little odd for someone as skilled in wielding them, whether written or spoken, as I am.

In any case, we, the two of us, have understood each other over the years, across two generations, despite conversing simultaneously in two self invented languages only partially overlapping.

Perhaps, in the last resort, there are no redeeming words. Perhaps, when it comes to the final parting, words best remain unsaid lest they lose their meaning.

In a coffin shaped glass case, aloft the shoulder of four study men, my final journey, I feel, is nearing its end. The men walk at a solemn, dignified pace. Their stride is even, their steps well aligned. My body is at no discomfort, my heart is not afraid.

We have left behind all men in whom I have a vested interest. We have abandoned all things that matter to me. We have deserted all those I love.

We meet no one to reignite my passion. We see nothing drastically new.

I know not whither I am taken. I am past caring.