1993

Suicide notes

Colin Hester

The University of Montana

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SUICIDE NOTES

by

Colin Hester

B. A., University of Waterloo, 1973

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Dear Friend,

The urn you have purchased has been hewn and crafted from the *fraxinus americana*, the legendary white ash of the Appalachians. The base, also of white ash, is fastened underneath to the hood of the urn by four hidden solid-brass screws and can be removed with ease. When filling the urn yourself, tenderly transfer the cremated remains from whatever temporary container your crematorium has supplied without breaking the enclosing sealed plastic bag.

Once the base and hood have been re-fastened, because of its solid ash construction and additional weight when it is occupied (imagine a large-sized coffee can filled with sand), the urn is best rested on fixed level surfaces that can bear its load.

Straight-grained and both strong and resilient, the wood has been darkened slightly in finishing. It requires no care, other than that which you bestow on your beloved.

Bardsman Woodworks & Co.

Ellicotville, N.Y.
He laid the letter beside the urn and the two postcards. One postcard revealed the sea--no land, no liners or tankers or trawlers--just the sea knuckled with waves and also one that came with the room, a watercolor of the white stone hotel with wind ripping the Union Jacks above, driving pyramid-shaped clouds through the blue sky. In front of the hotel Marble Arch stood square-shouldered with its gate closed. Red double-decker buses and taxis as tall as top hats streamed past trees that were domed nebulae of green leaves. The hotel postcard, the watercolor, was large but not large enough for what he had to say and the postcard of the sea knuckled and rising to meet the grey sky above already bore a stamp and a round cancellation imprint that read, Whitefish, Montana, 598. With the lamplight sheet-white and falling on the desk it occurred to him suddenly that he had not looked outside to find out the London weather.
They sat calling their sons' names, sat in barely scattered pairs with the smoke rising and the beverage steam rolling up out of their cupped hands, their sons' names calling and echoing so that the small arena rang like a burning church. She, however, sat alone in the row right behind the team bench. When Rud’s father bent and nudged gently the shoulder pads of a blonde boy named Troy, urging him along the bench and onto the ice, she jumped up and cheered and whistled with two fingers of one hand. She shouted, stamped her feet. Rud’s father glanced quickly over his shoulder at her, then again, longer, twisting his torso. Her earrings shone, her wet lipstick shimmered. She puffed on her cigarette, clapped, then took a deep pull, and the silver geese knitted on the front of her black woolen sweater erupted in flight. She pointed at Rud. His father turned.

"The gate!" his father bellowed in his English accent. "Lad! The gate! Open the bleeding gate!"

Troy’s skate blade kicked open the latch. Rud’s father laughed and Rud, the team stickboy, came to his senses.

Though not in time. In and out of the bench the players poured. Their skates threw chilling white roostertails, showering him. The puck bounded past his eyes, black, sliding, molten, and the players chased in after it, clacking their sticks. Troy, his blonde flag of hair at mast, flattened an opponent, stole the puck. His
mother bounced up and down. "Go son!" she yelled. "All right!" Troy jitterstepped through the other team. The din was ringing. His mother's excitement brought her down to the bench, bouncing and cheering beside Rud's father. Troy deked, blistered a shot, scored and, his stick raised, carved on the ice a wide circle of exaltation.

The arena rumbled as if it were sliding downhill. Troy's mother hooted and whistled. Rud's father covered his ears with his gloves and cocked his beautiful smile at her. That winter Rud's mother, her heart broken, froze to death.

The spring after they buried his mother in England, it was Rud's turn to fall in love and he did so with Mickey Mantle. He was ten, and it was a love that would last, as most loves that do last, because it could reside in various parts of the body, the brain when he read the back of Mantle's baseball card, the heart when Mantle lost the '61 homerun race to Roger Maris, and, when Rud imagined Mantle vaulting deep into the emerald shade of Yankee Stadium to backhand a line drive by the monuments, that most splendid part of all, the space in the back of Rud's throat.

The summer he was twelve-and-a-half, Rud fell in love again. She was his step-sister--his father had remarried--it never occurred to Rud that Mantle might mind. His father had bought a small bungalow in a flank of bungalows spreading east in Toronto and his step-sister was two years
older than he and had the bedroom next to his. She showered twice daily, lined her slippers with kleenex, washed her own underwear. He still couldn’t fall asleep with the door closed and when, after her nighttime shower, she flashed by his room like a ghost on fire she left a scent a fragrance he’d caught one other time, outside, after they’d just moved in, on a clear morning from the hedge when it was still in bloom. That was early summer 1963, the summer the Buddhist priest Quang Doc burned himself alive on the streets of Saigon.

On Labor Day of that summer, mid-morning, Rud sat on a street, on the curb, in shorts, T-shirt, Yankee cap, his baseball glove folded, tucked thumb-down under his ass. A little ways up the street the other kids, in wet matted hockey sweaters, hockey gloves and jeans, harrowed and howled and hammered up and down the asphalt, sweating and slashing and scraping each other in a game of road hockey. That’s all they played, it seemed, no matter the month, no matter the weather. Even today, when the sun’s climbing gave the sky a prickly haze the color of burnt mustard. Noon neared. A horizon of window air conditioners hummed in Rud’s ears. Beneath the prickly sky the game roiled on, until it ended as summer road hockey games always ended, both gradually and all at once, like ice cubes cast on the hood of a hot black car. Eventually Rud too wandered home, halted at the driveway bottom by the shouts and ringing swearing of his father and step-mother rowing.
Well, it was too hot to eat any rate and a measly half-day of summer holiday remained. He walked to the north of the two narrow parkettes. That was deserted, so he cut through to the south one. By now the sun had pounded the sky so blue it was near white and over by the new apartment buildings a dozen boys sat in the pool of lengthening shade given by a maple-tree cluster. Rud knew some of the boys, one in particular, Troy Coltrane, estranged son of Rud’s step-mother. The boy lived with his father and so far never menaced Rud. He went over.

"Hello."

No one answered. Booger Lashman, a high-school boy, a goon, looked up.

"Hey Troy, it’s your step-brother."

Troy rolled onto his stomach, plucked a burnt grass blade, hidden by his blonde flag of hair.

"Hey Coltrane!" Booger snickered.

"Don’t be an asshole," Booger’s younger brother said.

"Want yours widened?"

"Just don’t."

"Why?" Booger made a fist, thrust his thick body forward onto his knees. "Why don’t?"

"Just don’t."

"Suck boy," Booger said.

"Hey," the youngest Lashman brother, breaking through called to Rud, "Decent hat."

"A bit," Rud said.

"Says New York," Troy, still on his belly, announced.

"Brotherly love," Booger taunted.

"Lay off Boog," Cort said to his brother.

"Brotherly love," Booger repeated.

Still on his knees Booger made a sexual motion with his hips. He got no response. Not from Rud, who was properly bullied. Nor from Troy, who lay still as an assassin. Booger huffed back against the tree trunk.

"S’that why you talk all fucked up?" he asked Rud.

"Pardon?"

"’Cause you’re from nyu?"

"He’s a fuckin’ limey," Troy called out.

"I asked him, bonelick."

"Quiet!" Troy hissed. "It’s coming."

He scrabbled behind a tree trunk.

"Finally," said Cort Lashman.

"What is?" Rud asked, but the others were busy plastering their bodies into trees. They all crouched, slithering down the bark and, gosling-necked, reconnoitered. Rud though, hadn’t moved. He worked his baseball, grinding it into his glove’s oiled pocket.

"What?" he asked.

Past the trees the apartment’s sticky parking lot was empty. Nothing moved. At the end of the lot, out on
Kennedy Road, cars toured by like clouds. Someone whistled, long and low and slow.

"Wow!" Cort Lashman, still crouching, turned his torso and bowed to Troy.

"What d’I tell you," Troy said. "Truly, huh?"

"Truly," Cort Lashman said.

"What?" Rud asked. The boys ignored him. He raised his eyes, flashed them over the apartment roof.

"Truly," Troy said, "truly a d-r-fucking-eam."

Rudyard scanned the balconies of the fifth floor. The fourth. The third. What was Troy talking about? Then he saw. On the closest second floor balcony a girl leaned over the railing, book in hand. The sun sliced diagonally across the building and the girl stood on the glare’s edge. He squinted, shielded his eyes. She moved back into the shadow. Now he could see her. She wore a black and white bikini, and her shoulders curved as she moved under long, softly blonde hair. She shook her head and her hair lifted and before it touched her shoulders again what was revealed to Rud was pure beauty. She turned their way, twenty, maybe thirty yards distant, hovering. The boys hissed Quiet! at each other and Rud saw the color of her large eyes--a blue green, like when you snapped a spring branch and the bark came away slightly. He didn’t move. Her lips were a gentle pink, slightly pouted. She chewed gum, granted, but at least she hadn’t blown a bubble--and she shook her head
again and her hair lifted and she turned and he could see her bikini profile to her waist.

"That’s a dream?" Booger snickered.

"Bag off," Troy said.

"She’s--"

"Don’t," Troy warned.

"--a dream alright," Booger continued.

For the first time Troy took his eyes off the girl. So did Rud. Troy stood.

"A fucking carpenter’s dream," Booger said, grinning.

"I warned you," Troy said.

"Flat as a board and..."

Troy lunged. He crashed into Booger in full flight, fusing their bodies. They rolled over once, twice. Dirt spumed up and the other boys whooped and Booger’s size engulfed the smaller Troy and Booger’s brothers held each other back. The fighters rolled again and Troy surfaced with his arm locked around Booger’s head, his legs viced and scissored across Booger’s thighs.

"Take it back," Troy commanded.

"Flat as a--" Booger’s words were choked off.

"I’ll snap your fat fucking neck!" Troy seethed.

Rud believed him. Booger’s brothers did also. They searched their brother’s face for a sign to jump in. Finally they yelled, "Pile on! Pile on!" and dove and the other boys swarmed in, diving, a moiling vortex of T-shirts,
dirt and grunts. Only Rud, still apart, turned back to the
girl on the balcony.

A uniformed man held her by her upper arms. Open-
necked, his uniform was so blue it was purple. The girl set
her book on her head like a cap and together they spun,
slowly, full circle. She became the shade and he breached
the brightness at the balcony’s edge. He let her go and
turned and stood gripping the railing. He yawned and
stretched and rubbed his face. Out over the green riffling
trees he gazed through the brightness. His cheeks were
crimson and the buttons sashing down his shirtfront and
across his chest now fired by the sun were so black they
were silver.

The next day, the first day of school, Rud sat in
corduroys, shined shoes, Vitalis, sat outside the closed
door of the Principal’s office, waiting to be assigned to
one of the two eighth-grade teachers. Another new boy sat
beside him. He had pimples and a crew cut as planed and
rigid as a tabletop. If, Rud wondered, the girl on the
balcony was new, why wasn’t she sitting here? The office
door opened. The Principal emerged, frowning from brows to
the back of his bald head.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Your parents really should have
registered you during the weeks previous. We are, as it is,
to the limit crowded."
Down the hallway opposite, a class filed by, girls first. Pony tails, eyes poised, arms bared, skirts pleated, swinging, rocked by knees. Bare legs beneath. She was among them. Came the stabbing elbow throwers and pocket billiard artists, the line of boys. Troy led, his eyes everywhere but meeting Rud’s.

"Mr Bowler’s class," the Principal said.

Rud stood.

"Sit down young man," the Principal ordered. "Such eagerness. A sure sign of stealth, of certain mischief. You will go to Mr Allan’s."

Her name was Gale Harmon and Rud managed to see her every school day that fall, some days in library, some days at recess, some days on the way back from lunch. The first day of school after Christmas holiday Gale wore a baby blue cotton sweater, a sleeveless one that turned her eyes newborn blue. The next day she wore a light green one and her eyes turned the color of spring grass. On the second Wednesday in March a blizzard closed the school and Rud spent a good part of that morning in front of the mirror, combing his hair, changing sweaters, shirts, trying in vain to change the slate-color of his own eyes.

A wet bevel of snow sagged against the school wall where it had been shoveled and pools of slush lay about Rud’s Wellington boots. He bent sideways, rearing, almost
fetal, then threw his baseball straight up. The March wind buffeted it, carrying it towards the school building. Rud sideskipped through the slush, the deserted grounds, tracking its white mote through his webbing, trusting the ball’s flight as it curled back down. Skeddy, the boy with the pimples and table-top crew cut, trailed after him.

"My old lady says they come from broken homes," Skeddy said.

"Who?"

"The Beatles."

"Why’d she say that?"

"She says if I wore my hair like you she’d get the old man to whale my ass."

The ball landed in Rud’s glove with a soft thupp.

"I just washed it," Rud said. "There was no Brylcreme."

"'At’s a sack a shit. A sack a--Jesus, there they blows."

Around the far corner of the school walked Gale and her best friend Jennifer Budd. Troy was with them.

"Fuck man," Skeddy said. "That Budd has the budds."

Troy said something to Gale. Gale nodded, her pink cashmere beret set as softly as a kiss above her blue eyes, the only touches of color in a grey world.

The girls stood still, faced each other, talking. Troy started toward Rud and Skeddy. Rud pivoted, coiled at the hip. He fired again his ball skyward.
"Look how she never wears her fuckin coat done up," Skeddy groaned. "Her cones just stickin right out."
"She’s all yours," Rud said, as his ball peaked.
"Then lend me your glove."
"Why?"
"More’n a handful’s wasted."
The ball curved down. Rud dodged a slush puddle, twisting his waist, holding his glove palm-opened behind his back.
"Skedd," Troy called.
"I’m busy."
"We got hockey practice."
"Told ya, I’m busy, watchin."
The ball was a white flash past Rud’s shoulder. He felt the snap of impact, his wrist yielding. There was soft, woolen applause. Rud looked over. Gale was clapping her pink mittens.
"Quit screwin off," Troy told Skeddy.
"I’m not. I’m gettin a fingernail tattoo."
"You’re getting shit."
"Says, Jennifers, on my dick."
Rud pivoted and hurled the ball once more, the wind sailing it closer to the roof’s edge.
"You missed last week."
"Rud’ll cover for me," Skeddy answered loudly, "with his old man."
"You’re a stroke-off."
"I know."

"A fucking stroke-off," Troy repeated.

Rud barely heard them. There was only the air moving past his ears and the ball’s red stitches whirling their descent and Gale’s presence, watching him. He would be cool, utmost. Near the school wall his boots penetrated the shoveled snow. He stiffened his right arm, finding blindly the cold brick. The ball winged down at him and he leaped, brick raking the back of his hand and, and--there! He bounced off the wall, landing on one foot, then tumbled back-first into the snow. The ball dribbled out of his webbing. He was up at once, plucking it up, wringing it’s hide dry. He heard Gale’s soft applause.

"Nice try," she called over. She clapped her hands in the throw-it-here style.

"You’ve no glove," he said.

"That’s okay."

"It’s a real one."

"I know."

She clapped her hands again. Rud moved closer to her. Troy suddenly loomed between. Rud wristed the ball softly, floating it over Troy’s head. Gale caught it with two hands. Troy turned to her.

"Monkey in the middle," Skeddy called.

"Don’t," Troy said to Gale.
Gale stepped with her right foot and snapped, left-handed, the ball right at Troy. He flinched. The ball whistled by his ear, landed in Rud’s glove.

"Hey Jennifers," Skeddy said. "I’m gettin a tattoo."

Troy charged Rud. Rud shied, Troy snatched the ball from Rud’s glove, bounding sideways. Both boys breathed in lungfulls.

"Leave him alone, Troy," Gale said.
"Yeah," Skeddy said.
"Butt out stroke-off."
"Troy!"

"What about hockey practice?" Skeddy said.
"Practice," Gale said. "Remember?"
"You’re lucky," Troy snorted at Rud.
"No I’m not."
"Hockey practice," Gale repeated.

Troy held Rud’s ball like a s*ick fossilized turd.
"Lucky this aint our National fucking Sport."

Troy spun and drilled the ball over the school, and Gale shouted, "No!" and, with a metal twang, the ball glanced off the flashing. It rose in a high loop, then landed on the roof.

"That was miserable," Gale said. "Miserable!"

Rud felt tears. His heart raged. He opened his mouth to scream, tensed his fingers to claw and shred Troy’s flesh, rend his ribcage. Where did such rage come from?—so voluminous it terrified him. He turned, fleeing from it.
He raced across the schoolyard, slush flying, heading for the corner drainpipe. Then he was in the air. He seized its corrugated length—he didn’t care if it buckled—and finding a wall clamp to toehold he shinnied once, stretched, grasping where the pipe boned away from the wall. He swung free, the pipe creaked. Someone grabbed his ankle. Troy. Rud kicked out. His boot sailed off, yet he snagged with his ankle the roof edge.

Up he hauled himself, rolling like a highjumper. When he stood his bootless foot plunged in ice water. He heard Troy climbing, the drainpipe creaking. His boot was standing nearby and he thrust in his wet foot. He spotted his ball by the far flashing and he half-hopped across the frozen roof, Troy pounding behind. Rud’s breath was aflame, but he slid, stooping, touching his baseball with a fingertip before Troy crashed into his legs and knocked him over the edge.

He fell backwards to earth like a toppled crucifixion. The grey sky swooped up from behind his head with such alarm he shut his eyes and he heard himself land with a whump! before he felt it. He felt it then, no more shocking actually than a very firm mattress, a deep wave or vibration passing through his ribs, his organs. Once through him, it passed out of him, as quickly as, the simple assume, life passes from the newly dead. He was very still. His back was cold and he kept his eyes closed. Sluggish runoff dripped through a nearby sewer grating with a trickle. He
moved his arms, his legs. His clothing made a rustle in the crystalline snow.

He waited for as long as he could bear the wet cold for her to come. Finally he pushed himself up. He sat, stood, in his soaked boot on his heel only. In the long school building a solitary light burned. The Principal’s. He’d fallen right past the window. That was probably against the rules and he drove himself through the waist-high cedar hedge, onto the sidewalk that ran parallel to the school front. His eyes swept down the length of roof line. Troy had gone. He hobbled up the sidewalk, turned through the empty parking lot between the end of the school and the woods. A general ache gripped his body now, as pervasive as sadness. He hoped to at least salvage his glove. It too was gone.

Pounding like a tomtom, the filling bathtub drummed and foamed. Steam somersaulted through the bathroom and he squeezed with his palm the mirror. Over his left shoulder he examined the flesh and bone cage of his back. That his fall had not altered his young being, physically, led him to suspect, as he fell asleep that night, it had not altered him at all. This suspicion returned hours before dawn. In the dark shape shiftings of his bedroom he lay on his side, toasting under the covers. Off in the kitchen the electric kettle boiled. The floor creaked. His father’s slippers scupped the linoleum and Rud shifted his own arms, his own
legs. The teapot lid tinked. Why, if it was not miraculous, was it not even momentous?--no more now than a moment: his fall, his survival. His father’s morning tea. The whereabouts of his baseball glove.

That last small mystery was solved when he got to school. It had snowed lightly and a helm of tight cloud sealed off the school grounds. Primary graders shrieked after each other, skidding through the grey and white drabness. A grim morning, save she clutched his glove in her arms. She wore a waist-length fur jacket and her beret was blue. Her blonde hair was tied back, somehow by itself. Jennifer Budd, her long coat buttoned to her chin, stood not far to one side and beyond her Troy leaned against the corner of a white-washed portable, erecting a tall fin of snow with his feet.

"Hi," Gale said.

"Hi."

"Did you get your ball?"

"No."

"I got my tattoo," Skeddy interjected. "Wanna see?"

"Well, here." She handed Rud his glove.

"Thanks."

"Where’d you go?"

"Go?"

"Troy said you jumped off the roof."

"I jumped?"

"I know! And Jennifer and I--"
"--don't forget me--"

"--and Skeddy here, we waited, then we walked round but couldn't find you."

A warning bell rang, obliterating the sound of the playground.

"I sorta went the other way I guess." Rud slid his hand in his glove, wriggled the fingers, waggled the thumb. A beautiful scent emanated out of it, as if tanners now made leather from peaches.

"Thanks," Gale said.

"Thanks?"

"Yes."

"What for?" Rud asked.

"I don’t know really. I just feel I should say it."

She smiled, turned, walked to where Jennifer waited. Her plaid skirt curved over her bottom, the hem swaying. She dropped to one knee and pawed up a blue mitten-full of white snow. She and Jennifer walked over to Troy. He never once looked up. Gale grasped Troy’s hand. Rud could see him scowling. She dropped his hand, spun on her toe and lobbed her snowball at Rud. Not wanting to spoil his glove’s new fragrance he caught the snow ball with his bare hand. It disintegrated. Gale took Troy’s hand again and Rud knew in his heart her greatest kindness would be to leave him alone.
The evening light of June out the brown sides of the opened fire doors was a dusky pink. Half-brazen high school boys jelly-rolled their hair, smoked one-eyed, then shot onto the pavement thin jets of spit from between their clenched teeth. Just inside the doors Gale and Jennifer Budd swayed in each other’s arms. As did the other thirty-odd girls at the eighth-grade graduation dance. At that end of the gymnasium, a swath of pink and white and crinoline. Perfume and piled hairdos, their arms sleeved in long gloves. Under the opposite backboard, its blue helium balloon fatigued, Rud and Skeddy and a crew of boys gangled about. Troy ducked in from outside with the high schoolers. Reclapping his tie he propped himself up against the block gym wall, throwing sulks at Gale. When the song ended chunky Mr Bowler, at the turntable between the two sexes, snatched the microphone from Mr Allan.

"Attention! Atencion! Attenzione! For you unilingual cowards, Attention!" He pointed at the boys. "Gentlemen," he bellowed, "Preen. For this, my favorite song, is a ladies’ choice."

Bobby Vinton started singing "Blue Velvet." The girls resumed swaying with their feminine partners.

"Come on ladies," hollered Mr Bowler. "With the boys."

Sighing they dispersed towards the ganglers under the limping blue balloon. The music ceased with an abrupt crackle.

"Mr Vinton is patient," Mr Bowler said, "But I’m not!"
The girls quickened. Gale was coming right toward him, Rud thought. He straightened his back. Along the peripheral wall Troy shadowed her.

"Dance?" she asked Rud.

He looked at Skeddy.

"She aint askin’ me, dinkus."

Skeddy thwapped Rud’s ass with a pointy boot. Gale held her gloved left palm upward. Rud took it in his right. The song started again. A few feet away Troy glared at them like Achilles. She put her right hand on Rud’s waist, he put his left on hers. She pressed her body against his. Her hair was a single wave of blonde and her light blue earrings followed him like eyes as, though wobbly at first, he led. He couldn’t look in her real eyes.

"You’re supposed to tell me you like my dress," she said.

"I am. I do." He caught a glimpse of her green-blue eyes. "The gloves are dumb though."

She let go of his hand, resting hers on his shoulder and he touched the soft bare skin of hers. She leaned and pressed into him again as Bobby Vinton crooned about satin. The slight give of her breasts tickled him everywhere except where they touched him. Her perfume was the same peach richness that had blessed his baseball glove. Through shuffling couples though, Troy stalked them. Rud spun them away. His shoes sounded like they were soled in sandpaper. His hand slid from her waist to where her hips, her bottom
began and the only thing anchoring him to the earth was the both wonderful and terrifying lightness weighing in his stomach.

"What were you reading?" he croaked.

"Pardon?"

"Last summer. You were reading."

"Every day," she said.

Troy now loomed directly behind her and Rud spun them again, nearing where Mr Bowler stood.

"A policeman?" Rud said.

"Who is?"

"Your dad?"

"No. He’s a--"

Troy hooked Rud’s shoulder with his hand, twirling him slightly. His face was inches away, his breath warm with tobacco, his features cold as a stone’s.

"My turn," Troy said.

"So?" Rud said back feebly. He still held Gale’s waist, her shoulder. With a hip Troy shoved Rud and turned to Gale.

"Let’s dance," he said.

"I am."

"She is," Mr Bowler said. He dipped between Gale and the two boys, whisked away her hand, her waist, turned on Rud and Troy his wide chunk of a smile.

"Get used to it guys," he said and swept away.
Bobby Vinton sang of a glow. As Mr Bowler turned and danced Rud could still feel Gale’s body against his, in his hands. When finally he dared look at Troy he saw no rage, only a moment’s defiance barely concealing a hurt greater than his own.
Twenty six years later, Rud’s father, at the lakefront brewery where he worked, pinched his hand in the keg bander’s jaws when it lurched. The beast chomped off the top knuckle of his middle finger, macerated what was left. Dunc, his father’s best friend at the brewery and the Wheat Sheaf where his father drank, summoned Rud from his west-end office. The hospital was just around the corner, not far up from the massive groans and couplings of the railyards.

"Least I’ll get a week or two off," his father told him at Emergency. An East Indian girl, a young candy-stripe, fetched a wheelchair. She had faint wispy sideburns and long eyelashes that coursed, when she blinked, like otters. She and Rud funnelled his father into the chair, his father holding aloft the U of tape and steel that for now fastened the remains of his mashed finger to his hand.

"Please tell me," the candy-stripe asked Rud, "is this your father?"

"Yes."

She smoothed adoringly his father’s ever-glistening black hair.

"A saint," she said impishly.

"Nah," his father told her. "But the lad here is."


At the car yeasty air from the brewery clung to them. It was warm, busy. The sidewalk moved under market goers, telephone poles. Above the cat’s cradle of wires the sky
westward went from silver to blue and back to silver. The pavement shook. Tandem red street cars labored north, iron wagons.

"I won't ask if you were drunk," Rud told his father. "Why is that?"

"'Cause I've never lied to you."

"True."

"Well, once."

The pavement shook again. A southbound cement truck thundered past as loud as a derailing, its huge cauldron turning, mixing, slopping the concrete to fill the monstrous excavation of the new Dome.

"What are you going to do?" Rud asked.

"Change," his father said, "my bloody golf swing."

He helped his father into the car.

"Me too," Rud said.

"You?"

"Yes."

"But I golf Sundays."

"So?"

"What about your hardball?"

"Baseball," Rud corrected.

"Come off it lad, you hate golf."

"I'll caddy."

"Nah. You just want to keep an eye on me."

"That too," Rud said. "While I've got one to spare."

"Be hell keeping you out of the bar," his father said.
Rud swung close the passenger door. "I’ll take the wheelchair back."
"Tell her you made me walk again."

A seel, the leather hood with which a falconer blindfolds his bird, that’s what the leather splint his father had replaced the metal one with resembled. So Rud thought as he helped his father ascend the basement steps. His father’s breath came in heaves, and his good hand snatched arm lengths of hand railing.

"Minute ‘till closing," his father said, "Fickin’ Dunc, he orders the table covered with draft."
"Sure your gonna make it?"
"Covered. But I’ll tell you son, we weren’t the last to leave."

They crested the stairs, the mid-morning heat and sun striking their heads and shoulders. In the schoolyard across the road a solitary kid pitched a softball into the wire screen of the backstop. A neighbor drove by in his Mustang. He beeped, waved. Rud nodded back.

"Been lookin’ forward to this for a month," his father said. He sniffed deeply. "Do you good too."

Bearing his father’s clubs over his shoulder, Rud thought she held a barrette between her teeth as she gathered reeds of her black hair into a pony tail and with her arms raised and her hands behind her head moons of
perspiration darkened her blouse. Rud’s father, stared across the putting green at her standing and stretching by the pro shop.

"Good christ, lad," he said, "if I started shagging that I’d never bloody stop."

His father’s voice, though right beside him, was woolly to Rud’s ears. His own throat constricted. Blindly he touched his father’s navy blue golf shirt, the touch humid, electric, as charged as the dark underbellies of thundercloud that rolled in the suburban sky. Rud unlooped the golfbag strap from his shoulder, dropped the clubs on the green with thump and clatter. He took off his Yankee cap, combed with his fingernails his sweat-thickened hair. He started down the path towards the pro shop.

"Where’r you off to, then?" his father called out.

"Golf lessons," Rud answered, because, since he was an abject coward in the face of lust, that was his ploy. When he stood in front of her, she slid the barrette from between her teeth.

"Hi," she said.

It wasn’t a barrette but the fifth and final finger of a Kit Kat, a chocolate bar. Rud didn’t utter a sound.

She took a last bite, swallowed. She polished her teeth with her tongue. She groomed out with long handfuls her pony tail.

"How can I help you?" she asked.

Her slight Spanish accent and smile emboldened him.
"Go out with me," he said.
"No," she said.

He flattened the curved bill of his baseball cap. His eyes soaked up the green of the grass around his feet.
"No?"
"That’s right, no."

A foursome of dripping golfers tramped past, headed for the parking lot. They twisted to eye her and their wet shirts puckered across their backs. Beyond them, through the haze, Rud’s father putted crazily. Get ’em saying yes, that was his father’s strategy. And Troy’s. Rud looked at her again. She wore almond knee-length shorts. Her skin was the color of burnt-almonds. She smelled of almonds and of coconut and of grass and sweat.
"You the pro?" he asked.
"Assistant."

A baffle fluttered in his ears. Maybe she was wise to the yes strategy. Maybe, instead, he should keep getting her to say no.
"Marry me?" he asked.
"Okay."
"What?"
"I said, okay."
"I’m serious," Rud said.
"Me too." She didn’t flinch.
"Okay," Rud said. "Okay’s not serious."

At the first tee someone drove a ball into the clouds
with the sound of a brick hitting concrete. Rud allowed her a moment to break off. She didn’t shift her eyes from his. Since he had obviously already obtained in her eyes the status of imbecile he tried one more time.

"You give lessons?" he asked.
"Sometimes."
"Sometimes?"
"Some times," she said.
Rud started to laugh.
"Caddy lessons?" he asked finally.
"Caddy lessons?"
"You know, how to carry the clubs, write with those pencils."
"Pencils?"
"Yeah, the little ones."
At this she brightened. Her eyes ran down and up him. He was wearing a T-shirt, cut-off denim shorts, white Tretorn clogs with no socks and this anti-golf costume seemed arch, ridiculous to him, especially when she said,

"For a man, you have lindas piernas--beautiful legs."
Now he had the heart of a lost sea calf. He could not meet her eyes, yet nor could he look at his legs. He turned back to the practice green. His father waved, made the thumbs-up sign.

"Well," Rud said. "Maybe, maybe later."
"Later?"
She smiled out of one side of her mouth, a white sabre
of teeth. She had one eye closed and she squinted with the sunlight flashing across her cheek. Rud found himself mirroring her squint, her smile.

"I’ll book a lesson," he said. He plopped his Yankee cap on. "For him. For my dad."

He took a steep breath, turned and, slowly, headed back up the path through the heat. Her gaze burned across his body and he walked as if on a boiling sea. In the near distance, on the practice green, his father made the thumbs-down sign. She called to him.

"That first time," she said.

He stopped but couldn’t turn around.

"If you’d asked," she said. "Asked, I might have said yes."

Her words faded. Seashells of thunder filled his ears. Golf club shafts clicked and his guts moaned sliding down into his groin. What touched him deepest though, above all that, was the soft laughter of his father as at the edge of the hole his putt died.

The next week the weather changed. Toronto’s is cyclonic, yet Sunday rose chilly, as heavy as the four days before. Rud made coffee—he usually took tea on Sunday mornings—and waited until eleven when he could safely telephone his father to find out their tee-off time. At ten-thirty Rud’s phone rang.

"How d’you get to the Bluffs?" his father asked.
"You okay?"

"Course. How do you get there?"

"Why?"

"Because I don’t know how."

"I don’t know. D’you have a map?"

"You do."

"They’re atlases," Rud explained. "Of the world." He could hear music, Rod Stewart. "Look," he said, "I’ll be right down."

He went out the door to his townhouse, splashed down his brick steps, then descended the short zig-zag of concrete stairs to his father’s basement apartment. He knocked. Rod Stewart sang through the door: "I Don’t Want to Talk About It." Rud knocked again.

"Come in."

"It’s locked."

"You’ve got a key."

He did. He opened the door. The apartment was small, a bachelor, and he turned into the kitchenette, dragged out a counter stool, perched on its edge.

"What’s this stuff about the Bluffs."

The Bluffs were tall chalk cliffs, white carvings sheered by years and the lake out of the shoreline that ran east from Toronto’s downtown.

"Well?"

"Dunno. Thought it might remind me of the sod."

"England?"
The song ended. His father slid off his stool, walked into the dark living room, rewound the cassette, fast-forwarded it, rewound it. On the beige kitchen counter beside Rud’s elbow a shell-shaped spill from the pepper shaker thinned itself out into isolated grains. Beyond, a buff envelope lay, unopened. Rud turned it a notch to better read the return address: Workmens’ Compensation. The harp-like glissando of Rod Stewart’s lament began again.

"Good bit a rasp, Old Rod," his father called into the kitchen. "When he’s sad."

Rud turned the envelope back the way it was. His father came back into the small kitchen, by-passed the stools. With the heel of his hand his father punched open the high window then sat at the small table beneath where he ate and, as now, smoked.

"How’d you know I had a key?" Rud asked.

"Same as they know," his father said.

"Who?"

"Well they can kiss my starboard nut," his father muttered, then drifted into the ballad’s sentiment, humming.

"Who?" Rud repeated. "Know what?"

His father crooned the song gently.

"Dad. Please."

His father held up the splinted finger. "That I was drunk," he said. "As you knew. They’ll cut me off, off my bloody benefits. Mine. And Etta’ll find out."

"How?"
"The way she knows everything, the way you do."
"I don’t mean Etta. The Workmen’s Comp people. You haven’t even opened it."
"No need."
His father fanned his elbows on his thighs, clasped his hands, stared at the floor between his feet.
"You know?" his father started.
"Know what?"
"What the trouble with living in the past is."
Rudyard took the requisite pause.
"That it’s so damned crowded," Rud answered finally.
"And the weather’s the shits," his father said.
Rod Stewart raled on. The game had suddenly aged ungracefully, at least for Rud. He knew his father didn’t want to talk about it either. All these years, they’d never talked about the night his mother had died, never would.
"Your mother," his father began.
A chill knifed through Rud’s ribcage.
"She—, and now Etta." His father squinted up through his taper of cigarette smoke. "She’ll never have me back. Never."
"Things change."
"Nah," his father said. He appeared puzzled.
"They might."
"Why in God’s name," his father asked, "are you wearing those ficking shorts?"
"These?"
"It’s cold, rainy."

"I thought we’d, you know."

"You’re that daft."

"I am," Rud said. "It’s supposed to brighten. We can have a coffee while we wait."

"It’s not gonna brighten."

"We’ll get a street map, then. Buy one, plot the way to the Bluffs."

"Yeah," his father said. He crushed his cigarette.

"You’re sure you don’t want me to open it?"

"No," his father said. He stood.

"You’ll know for sure."

"No such bloody thing," his father said.

At their backs the sky was a grey cape flapping and swimming inches above the skyline. They left the city, headed northeast up the river valley. Rain dripped on the hood of Rud’s Bonneville and wind moaned in his closed windows. Yet on the course people were indeed stalwart. A few argyle tramps swung down the chilly fairways, chipped white arcs onto the soggy greens. One, Rud noted as he hefted his father’s clubs out of the trunk of his car and carried them to the club house, even dared plus-fours. But no one else wore shorts.

"Christ," his father suggested, "let’s give it a rest."

"We’re here now. Let’s stay."
His father squeezed his splinted finger with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

"Know how bad I feel?"

"Like when you backed the tractor into that lady’s toolshed?"

"Her greenhouse. Jesus, is there a sound, a sound more, more wonderful than glass breaking?"

"Wonderful?"

"When the bloody sky falls, that’s what it’ll sound like."

"What about the thump, the metally thump telling you it’s not a vampire but the furnace waking you?" Rud said.

"Some nights I’d rather himself."

They went up the wooden steps, crossed the staves of the deck. The patio-table umbrellas were shut and battened to their poles. His father strode past the lockerroom entrance, didn’t even give it a glance. He stopped at the lounge door.

"I’ll nip in here for a bit," his father said. "Just a bit."


"Tea," his father said. "You get that map?"

"Not yet," Rud said. "I’ll check the pro shop."

She wasn’t there. He went outside, prowled around the shrubbed perimeters of the cedar clubhouse. His eyes searched the practice green, the deserted first tee, the
flagless dark teardrop of the 18th green. Rain drizzled down. The clouds were so low it didn’t have far to fall. He hopped a shrub, took cover under the overhang, rubbed his legs with his hands. Did golf pros take Sundays off? Perhaps, when raining. Surely even he could pry her name out of whoever was working and he returned to the pro shop. It was still unmanned. He went to the counter, by the cash register, seeking her name on whatever clipboarded roster dangled there.

She was behind, on one knee, shelving cellophaned pairs of golf balls. She wore a beige cap with an elongated peak that read Links and also a Walkman. She glanced up at him but did not stand and he dipped under the counter and stooped beside her and asked with a marked rise in intonation,

"Go out with me?"
"Callate."
"What?"
"Shush!"
Her hair was a thick braid of black down her spine. He heard a swell of applause in miniature.
"Santana?" he whispered.
"The Jays."
"Who?"
"The Jays, baseball."
"Really? You like baseball?"
"No."
"No? But--"
She waved him quiet. He duck-stepped closer, tilted his head earwards.
"Who?" he said.
She glared at him.
"Who, I mean," he whispered.
"Dedos."
She said the player's name as if she'd not only pronounced it a thousand times but in a thousand and one ways. That one way, that thousand and first bred in Rud an unquenchable jealousy.
"He's the same age as me," Rud said. "From Argentina."
The look she gave him said either, So what? or No shit! She rifled into the shelves a few more packages of balls.
"He's the only one," Rud said. "Ever."
She held up a finger.
"From Argentina that is."
She held up two. This close she was as he'd all week imagined her to be: darkly complected yet, about her nose, freckles. Their eyes touched, momentarily. Hers, in a complexion that dark, were startlingly blue.
"I played too," he said.
"Wait."
"In college."
"Please!"
"At Cornell."
She clamped her hand over his mouth. She blinked, made a fist. The pro shop door scraped, opened, and they turned as one. The door did not close and frigid air slapped the bare skin of Rud's legs. Through the glass counterfront, like looking out from inside an enormous aquarium, the golfer's trousered legs were visible, his brown and white tasseled shoes. Rud's father. The shoes shifted right then left, stumbling slightly. His cleats made a plucking sound on the rubber. He left.

"I gotta go," Rud mumbled. She unclamped his mouth.

"Don't," she said.

"Yes."

She shook her head, raised her blue eyes, as if the radio waves entered therein.

"Go out with me?" Rud asked.

"When?"

"Tonight."

She waited a minute before answering, listening.

"Tonight," Rud reiterated.

Her face bloomed, blossoming suddenly into a broad smile. She clapped her hands.

"Home run," she said loudly. "Home run!"

"Great, just great. Well?"

"Dos y dos, tuk!" She clapped again.

"About tonight?" he repeated.

"Tonight? I can't, tonight. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," Rud said, disappointed.
She blinked at him, as if calculating.
"Of course," Rud said quickly, "Tomorrow. Great." He went to stand. She snatched his wrist, halting him, laid it with her hand on top on his upper thigh.
"Late," she said.
"Late is okay, fine."
"After midnight. Just a walk or something."
His hand trembled. She snapped hers from his.
"Don’t worry," she said, "the horny latina lady isn’t going to fuck you to death."
She swiveled on her toes, her face grim. She pushed golfball packs into the display two, three at a time.
"That’s not what I meant," Rud said.
She ignored him.
"I was worried it might be cold, rainy."
"You’re wearing shorts."
"Yeah," Rud said. "I’m daft. Late?"
"Yes," she said.
On Buffalo PBS they watched All Creatures Great and Small. Rud drank a tin of Molson's, his father sipped spring water from an emptied rum bottle. Rud sat on the chair from the kitchen, he'd changed his shorts for Levis. His father sat deep in the couch, smoking, in work pants, T-shirt, slippers, emerging from the couch's pliant viscera to flick his ash into the beanbag ashtray on the coffee table. A nearby plate with cold sardines on toast lay untouched in the steel Y of a knife and fork. Bits of ash scarred the plate's rim when his father, as now, tapped the barrel of his cigarette on the ashtray edge.

As for the tv show, young country vet James Herriot took fair Helen's hand, led her up the stairway of a ruinous flintwalled castle. The same castle where Mary Queen of Scots had been imprisoned. As they climbed their shoes knocked and scuffed on the stone.

"Lend me some runners?" his father asked.

"Some runners."

"Plimsoles, running shoes."

"Is this for the Bluffs?"

"I can't wear golf spikes. You going to eat this?" his father asked Rud.

"No."

"With tomato sauce."

"Sorry."
Rud collected the plate, carried it into the kitchenette. What was his father going to do at the Bluffs and how could she have blue eyes and freckles. On the countertop the pepper spill remained, the envelope gone. Grey sudsless dishwater half-filled the sink. Rud scraped his sardines into the garbage bag, slid his redstained plate into the water. He swept with the blade of his hand the white and grey peppergrains into his other palm, stropped them into the sink. He saw, on the other side of the sink, the envelope sticking out of his father’s paperback like feet of a too-tall sleeper. With hallucinatory clarity, the moment outside the hospital returned to him.

"When did you lie to me?" he said softly. He heard his father’s laughter. That was better. He swiped up the paperback, wandered back into the living room, studying the title page.

"Reading Shogun again I see," he said.

His father didn’t answer. Rud peeked at the envelope’s underside. Still unopened. On screen they stood on the castle’s topmost battlements, the stone crumbling. Distant, the north English dales, green and gliding, swelled into soft mountains of snow and mist. There was wind, and the two actors looked cold.

"I like the way he proposes to her," Rud said.

"Do what?"

His father, the cigarette smoldering in his right-hand fingers, blottered his eyes with the back of his wrist.
"James," Rud explained. "The way he proposes to Helen."

"Sure. The weather's the shits," his father said.

Maybe what Rud had heard coming from the living room wasn't laughter. So he convinced himself when, after the show ended, he left to fetch his father a pair of his Nikes. A lovely summer warmth had grown in the air during the time he'd spent at his father's, wild, as if it had ridden in bareback on nightfall. Rud paused a moment on the patch of grass between his father's top step and the brick steps leading to his own front door. He could smell the damp grass and nearby foliage warming. The shadows of the playground equipment in the schoolyard across the street drew back into their wood and pipe forms. A block west the lights of uptown store signs were underscored by their darkened windows beneath. Sunday night was rotten with irony and he'd had enough, especially of his own, and when, by his father's door, he handed over the Nikes he asked,

"Why don't you try A.A. again? You last a year, Etta'll have you back."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I can't pay you the rent this month."

"I'm not talking about the rent."

"Can't pay next month either."

"I don't care about the rent, d'you hear me? Never cared."
"I’m not living here for nothing."
"Fuck the money. Fuck it! Just go to the fucking A.A."
"No!"
"It’s once a bloody week. Once a week. Good Christ."
"That’s not it."
"What then?"

His father searched his pants pockets, turned, went into the kitchenette. Rud followed as far as the entranceway. His father sat on a stool, took out his cigarettes, his lighter, his nail clippers. He clipped off the white filter of a Player’s, tapped the tobacco down.

"It’s the religion."
"The religion."
"The jumbo-mumbo."
"I don’t get it."
"The born-again horse’s-ass."
"So?"
"It’s not sincere."
"Sincere?" Rud said. "Not sincere?"
"You asked, I told you."
"So fake it," Rud said. "Fake it." The rot of irony in his own words, as rich as orchids, almost sickened him.

"Sunday," Rud said. He shook his head. "I never thought I’d long for fucking Monday morning."

"I never thought I wouldn’t," his father said.
"Look Dad, Jesus. Look. I don’t care. Stay here for ever. Shove the goddamn brewery."

"And live off my kid. No bloody thanks."

"There’s our book warehouse. I might--"

"You’d feel responsible. People’d blame you if I ballsed up."

"We’ll hire you through Troy."

"So what?"

"They still don’t know he and I, that were related, sort of."

"But you and me, we’ve the same last name."

"Yeah, well, you got him his job."

"Me? You did. No. No, I said." His father’s face fell blank, his mouth slightly open. "Anyroad," he said after a moment, "still rainin?"

"Warm. Almost muggy. A relief."

"And the lad, Troy, how is he?"

"My boss."

"Bloody fear! Since when?"

"Since a few weeks from now. I heard a rumor."

"Sorry," his father said. He finished his cigarette. Rud stepped fully into the kitchenette.

"Dad?"

"Does he ever talk to his mother? See her?"

"No."

"Not even secret-like?"

"Not that I know."
As, secret-like, his father's eyes were brown. Rud had never noticed before, or if he had, had not thought it noteworthy enough. What had always held his attention in his father's eyes was the scar tissue in each, tiny web-foot shapes resulting from a brewery accident when Rud was in the ninth grade.

"Dad."

"What son?"

"I gotta go. Can I, give you a hug?"

His father stood. They embraced with the slow care of surgery patients. Rud felt the shadow of his father's whiskers, the smooth skin of his cheekbone, the Brylcreme slick of his jet black hair. Like all men embracing, they began to simultaneously pat each other on the back, on the shoulders.

"I love you."

"I know that son. I love you too."

They stepped back from each other.

"And thanks," Rud said, "for going to the golf course."

"Ah."

They walked to the door.

"How'd you do?"

"Pretty well."

"She looks nice, kind."

"I don't know yet."

"Well, even if she's not," his father said, "Bit of tail, especially a lovely one like that, never hurt a man."
The Birth of Winter

From your bookshelf in Martins Ferry,
I hush an anthology of poets,
cold tennants
who speak a lipless pentecost
of flutes and tears.

I think of your grandmother, piddled
on shandy and brandy. Her Wellingtons
cross the trestle of two pub chairs
to drain her varicose legs.

I hear
your sons hieing, lovely and dying,
in the snakes and ladders of your bed.
Lament for Federico Garcia Lorca

At what hour in the afternoon
did the bullets spall his sun tapered body?

At what hour in the afternoon
did his unmarked shadow topple its grave?

At what hour in the afternoon
did stone claw the lion of his forehead?

At what hour of the afternoon
did ants undress his long copper tongue?

Lad,
even the dead die.
The moment my knife bloodied the bathtub,
his soul flamenco'd the Rock of Gibraltar,
whirling a beauty: a wooden Walt Whitman
whose butterfly beard snapped the spine of the sea.
The day before his father killed himself, Rudyard Gillette found him sober and sitting at his kitchen table, staring at some distant place between his feet, and his father had squinted up at Rud, licked the dry cracks of his 61-year old lips and told him what he'd finally figured out, that the trouble with living in the past was, it was so damned crowded.

Three years later, when Rud saw the woman run outside and cross the playing field, when he recognized her as the first and unrequited love of his boyhood, he recalled his father's words and their hint of warning. He heard them as clearly as if his father had been with him in the staffroom instead of standing on the dresser back in the hotel room, heard them as clearly as if his father was again flesh, instead of ash in the wooden urn where Rud kept him.

Rud heard his father but knew he would not heed him. Perhaps because at that moment, standing there in the vast confine of the teacher's lounge staring out the window, Rud was completely alone.

He was 39 years old, a textbook salesman, though none of the teachers here at Our Lady of Grace High School wanted to buy his books. This pleased him, for he was a bit daft and more than a bit of a dreamer. The morning bell had tolled and those teachers left in the lounge gathered foolscap and piled on daybooks and hurried off to home room. Came the Lord's Prayer, the Anthem, the announcements.
Another bell rang and Rud had abandoned his small display of textbooks and drifted to the window. The view from the window tunneled south between twin wings of classrooms. At the end of the east wing, the parking lot jutted out its black corner then the yellowed grass, matted and trampled fed downhill forming the playing field and behind the field the river--the St. Lawrence--dark green, processional, bearing its way east to the Atlantic. He couldn’t imagine a colder ending. And then he saw her.

She was still slender, and tall in a short khaki skirt that flapped as she ran and revealed the athletic loveliness of her legs and bottom. Above her skirt she wore an unfashionable stretch windbreaker, over her ears an ugly gold toque. She carried a bundle of baseball bats--baseball bats!--as if toting kindling, and a trail of shivering teenaged girls tagged behind her. The girls ran colt-legged and fell steadily behind. They followed her down the slight incline and her lead increased. She seemed not to notice. At the bottom of the hill she crossed the cinder of the running track, jogged under the goal posts, sprinted onto the football field. She reached the middle of the field, dropped the baseball bats, blew her whistle and waved and pointed as if the girls were there assembled. Finally the young girls arrived, gathered into nests around the pile of bats. They hugged their chests and bounced up and down in their aerobic shoes to keep warm. The woman laughed. Rud too was enjoying this. She blew her whistle again and again
and she knelt and hoisted a bat exultantly and Rud realized they were not bats at all, but field hockey sticks. Someone tapped Rud on the arm.

"Is she wearing something of yours?"

Rud turned. A huge man, his arms folded across his chest, eyed Rud suspiciously. He towered well over 6 feet and his great barbered face tapered down to a vandyke beard. A paisley cravat made his neck even thicker. He thrust out his hand.

"Monsieur Michel, Head of Moderns."

"Rud Gillette."

"Are you supply?"

"What?--oh, no, no I’m a publisher’s rep. School House Press."

"Ah, School House. School House. Good. Anything nouveau besides that horrible Francais vivant?"

"We’ve the second edition."

"Besides that," Monsieur Michel repeated.

"Afraid not. Only book three," Rud said. Monsieur Michel patted his breast pocket and made a tiny popping sound with his lips, as if counting. Rud turned back to the window. Out on the football field the woman was choosing the huddled girls into sides. The girls spread out, gradually, and the woman bent slightly each time she doled out the hockey sticks. Without his driving glasses Rud could not clearly see her face, yet he pictured her still as beautiful as the first moment he had seen her.
"Tabernac!" boomed Monsieur Michel from behind. Rud whipped around, his cheeks burning.

"I may buy the damned book," Monsieur Michel snapped, his breath heavy with the smell of pipe tobacco, "just to stop you from ogling."

"I'm sorry," Rud said. He struggled for an explanation. "The woman out there," he began.

"Yes?"

"The gym teacher."

"Yes?"

Rud paused. Her name was Gale, and Rud saw her again that first time, on the summer balcony of her apartment. He felt her sway in the twigs of his arms the time he danced with her at their eighth-grade graduation to Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet." That he had survived the dance was as incredible as the fact that she had, while his stepbrother glared like Achilles, asked him. He led, wobbly at first, and the slight give of her breasts tickled him everywhere except where they touched him, his one hand trembling on her satin waist, the other on her bare shoulder. Her hair was a single wave of blonde and her light blue earrings followed him like eyes as they turned and circled for he couldn't look in her real eyes and her arms were sleeved in long white gloves he thought silly except for the fragrance of peach they gave off that dizzied him and now as back then he swallowed with no little difficulty.
"We went," he said finally, "to different schools together."

Monsieur Michel laughed. He rested a porterhouse hand on Rud’s shoulder.

"Come on monsieur," he said. "Let me have an examine of that awful book of yours."

"The second edition?"

"Yes. These damn rules."

"Rules?"

"Yes. I won’t change my mind, but it will allow me to feel purpose while I go outside to take a pipe."

Monsieur Michel bade Rudyard across the teachers’ lounge. He wore heavy leather boots and the right sole was two inches thicker than the left. He had no trace of a limp, at least what Rud could discern. At the coffee table where Rud’s textbook samples were fanned out, he scooped up the French book one-handed. He turned it back and forth, as if appraising a glass of brandy. The nicotine stained tips of his fingers were layered with callous and scored with a grid of tiny black crevices.

"Second edition, eh?"

"Yes."

Monsieur Michel sighed. "I pray your editors have dispensed with that ridiculous present historique." He spun on his heel, tucked the book under his arm, and cruised out of the room.
Alone once again, Rud sat on the couch, grateful his boss Troy wasn’t here. He hoisted one ankle onto his knee, unflapped his Harris Tweed, sank back. The cushions yawned open for him. Troy would have hounded after the man, followed him outside, even, if necessary, into the shitter. He constantly hammered at Rud to work the customer, work the fucking customer. Whereas Rud figured the teachers knew their subject better than he ever could. His job was bad enough without shoving the books at people as Troy did so slickly and, Rud was forced to admit, with so much success.

Now his eyes fell closed. He began to muse on his dream of the night before when the door of the teacher’s lounge thumped open. He startled and sat aright. From the doorway a priest in his early sixties smiled at him. The priest had a widow’s peak of slicked black hair and a complexion as fair as moonlight. The door swung back closed and another priest, younger and with dark opposite genetics, punched through, bumping his senior. He said sorry, glanced Rud’s way, at his wares spread on the coffee table, then hurried to the other end of the lounge. The older priest’s eyes roved over Rud’s display for a moment before he smiled again and followed his younger.

Rud slid his leather barrister’s case--his bookbag--out from under the coffee table. He drew out several call report forms. Blank, they certainly summated his day. Again the door: two teachers this time, a man and a woman in lab coats, each dangling a coffee mug. They nodded, spied
Rud’s books, then hurried to the chrome cylinder of the coffee urn and the long table where the priests and a few other lay teachers chatted. Rud penned in an apocryphal call report:

SCHOOL: Our Lady of Grace
CONTACT: Father Sun, Father Moon
S.H.P. TITLE:

He paused, stumped. His hangover, banished earlier by asprin and Beta Carotene, resurfaced and no glib little ripostes presented themselves to him. He gave up the call-report charade and again slouched deeper in the couch. He clasped his hands between his legs. He frowned. Jesus. He’d drunk too much red wine at dinner the night before, then several hours before dawn his on-again-off-again girlfriend Amaranta Elena Versalles, slipped dark and naked through the cinder-block wall of his hotel room. She had, via the earth’s mantle, returned miraculously and directly from Dunedin, Florida, and had masturbated him while wearing a baseball glove.

He’d awoken in the darkness, alone, to find the end of his diminishing cock dribbling into a spreading pool of semen. He’d then slept through his wake-up call and hadn’t had time this morning to shower. He sniffed his fingertips: leather from lugging his bookbag, gasoline from filling his car. He checked his watch. The period was almost over and he wondered how Gale was getting along. He rose from the couch, wiped the sweat that stood on the ridge of his
cheekbones, walked over to the window. A line from Camus came to him, that the important thing was not to be cured but to live with one’s ailments. No shit, Albert. He promptly forgot Camus when he looked out the window and saw the emptiness of the football field. Gale Harmon was gone.

His notion that he might pretend to chance into her now seemed absurd and a tide of foolishness threatened him. Once more he would surely have proven a bungler at guile. He ran his fingers through his greasy hair. He hadn’t checked out of the hotel yet so he could still dart back grab a quick shower before hitting the next school on his itinerary. Still he needed some justification for his presence here, not so much for his boss’s as for his own sake. He thus returned to his display. He stood the two newest titles—Living With Living Things and Wave and Particle: The Dual of Light—upright on the table and rotated their front covers to face the door. He sat once more on the couch, off to the side, perched on the edge to stay alert. At the far end of the lounge the younger priest, holding firm to the table’s edge, teetered his chair on one leg. The others at the table read the newspaper and talked. Chopped off sentences mixed with the stale steam of the coffee urn wafted down.

"More frogs," said the woman in the lab coat.

"Long as she manages," the older priest told her. He shot a darting look at the teetering priest. The sun had risen enough outside to illuminate the upper right corner of
the window from where Rud had seen Gale. The middle pages
of Living With Living Things fluttered, the staffroom door
opened and closed. Someone had perhaps had second thoughts.
Gale? Rud looked down at his shoes, tiring of his anxiety.
A tiny moraine of clay muddied the instep of his left
wingtip. He pried it off cleanly with his thumbnail. He
pondered its disposal. He opened his bookbag, shifted his
samples, pulverized the bit of mud with his fingers, letting
it sift inside. Now what to do. Read? He drew out his
copy of Modern Stories in English. The anthology was
endangered, canonical, a dog, slated by Troy for out-of-
print. yet Rud still packed it along, to read. He wriggled
on the edge of the couch until comfortable, leaned forward
and held the book open on the coffee table. He turned to
Joyce’s "Ivy Day in the Committee Room" and read. Within
seconds he could smell the smoke of Old Jack’s crackling
fire, hear the pok! of the tardy cork flying out of Mr.
Crofton’s bottle of stout.

Monsieur Michel approached brandishing the French book.
Rud hadn’t even noticed his return.

"Your editors," he proclaimed. "Not all bad."
"I’ll tell them," Rud said.

The bell rang. Out in the hallway feet churned on the
wood of the floors. The lounge door swung open and Rud
looked up to see, through the steady wave of teachers
streaming out to class, the woman stride into the lounge.
Because of the milling teachers he couldn’t see her face
from where he sat, couldn’t see if it really was Gale. He turned the anthology face down on the coffee table. He twisted on the couch. Monsieur Michel was saying something. "I’m sorry?" Rud said. All he could see was that she had not changed her clothes from being outside, not even the horrid gold toque.

"A complimentary copy," M. Michel repeated. Rud nodded. "Yes," he said absently. She was gone again. Damn.

"It’s the balance of this book," M. Michel said.

"Balance," Rud said, nodding. The two teachers in lab coats, queuing for the door, stepped in front of the coffee table. Their backs formed a white blind.

"Between the little and the big, the head and the tongue," M. Michel continued.

The teachers in the lab coats stirred. The woman’s searching eyes poked up above their heads and they recoiled and she popped between them as if ducking under a low gateway. She bit into an apple and they exchanged glances and finding a clear space by the window facing outside she took a deep breath. The sun and shadow by the window still deprived Rud of certainty until she turned and, unsmiling, looked straight into his eyes.

It was Gale. She had the same sudden blue eyes but somehow more stark. She left the window, walked right up to the coffee table as if she might slap him or accuse him and stopped. She reached down absently for the wooden armrest
of the matching chair beside the couch. Still she didn’t smile. She bit into her apple, scanned Rud’s books fanned out on the coffee table.

"I’m the English head," she said.

Rud said nothing. She remained standing. Her eyes flickered over his face. Her eyes touched his own eyes, his nose as he breathed, his lips as he licked them. He set his jaw even. He swallowed. A slight tremor planed down his body and her eyes lifted and again set on his and he returned her smile.

"When I heard your name this morning," she told him, "on the announcements, I remembered it. From Midland. I’m Gale Harmon."

Rud took a deep breath of his own.

"I know," he said.
Rud stared at Gale for the longest moment as she nudged the gold toque up on her forehead as she read his titles spread out on the coffee table. What was it about the eyes, Rud asked himself, that made you wonder if it really was she?

Gale fidgeted under Rud’s stare. Her legs were still reddened from the wind. She pointed to the face-down anthology on the coffee table. "What’s that?" she asked.

"Modern Stories in English."

She sat down in the chair. She pushed her sleeves up to her elbows, stretched a bare arm out and leaned forward. The whistle around her neck swung down and clunked against the edge of the table.

Rud pointed to the whistle. "Is that for teaching Kipling?"

"Yes. And phys. ed. We all do something else since the staff cutbacks. But I used to teach phys ed as well--" Continuing to pronounce the ell, she thumbed through the pages of the anthology. "--even before. Hmm," she said. "'Ivy Day in the Committee Room.' 'A Rose for Emily.' Kind of corny."

"Corny?"

"Yes, you know, De rigueur." She laid the book open across her lovely bare knees, wet her finger and flipped past a few more pages. "Now this," she said.

"What?"
"This." Her fingertip bounced on the open page.

"Hemingway, 'A Very Short Story.' That, that's different."

"Different."

"Yes, because usually it's--" Her words stopped, though her lips continued to move, if faintly. She ran the quick of her finger down the 3/4 page introduction and short Hemingway-biography. Then she narrowed her eyes at Rud.

Yes, Rud realized. That was it. Why she looked so stark, so different: she had no eyebrows.

Suddenly she struck the flat tabletop with the book. The heavy book cracked against the steel edge, smacked the glass top. There was a collective inhalation and Gale jumped out of her chair and all noise ceased. Rud sat, immobilized.

"Goddammit. That's a lie," she said evenly.

Rud's mind whirled. A lie? Gale paged back through the book and Rud swept his eyes over the room, for some reason hoping the priest hadn't left at the class change. He had. Gale found her place, cleared her throat and read,

"The author died in Ketchum Idaho in 1961 from gunshot wounds. Gun shot wounds?"

Now Rud knew.

Gale looked round, as slowly as a sunflower. She held the book at arms length, and with both hands punctuated the air with it. She intoned as if reciting plainsong and her words echoed through the still air of the room,
"Ernest Hemingway put his favorite shotgun in his mouth and--BANG!"

A few feet away M. Michel gasped. Gale rubbed her eyes with her raw knuckles, wiped a bare arm across her forehead. She snatched a handful of her woolen hat and slowly, after a slight hesitation, pulled it off her head and not more than a few feet away from Rud and still clutching his sample copy of Le français vivant, M. Michel cried, "Mon Dieu Gale. What next?"

She was bald. Her head was smooth, perfectly shaved, a dome of whiteness, a half-circle of fresh skin. Defiantly she cast her new appearance about the lounge. She set herself back down in the chair, crossed her legs. Holding aloft the book again she flailed the air in a mock-demented manner.

"So there!" she said to Rud. She smiled. When she noticed Rud gaping she laughed. "I'm sorry," she said. She opened her hand, held it flat inches from her forehead and passed it down the entire length of her perfect smiling face, erasing her smile, leaving a serious set of her jaw.

"It really is nice to see you again."

"Me," Rud stammered, nodding and her smile and laughter broke through once more. "How'm I doing?" she said to the stunned still-staring, rest of the room.
Within minutes of leaving the staffroom for the privacy of Gale’s office Rud would have liked to turn around. He could no longer pretend this was a coincidence, a chance meeting. Lugging his bookbag he followed Gale past closed windowless classroom doors, up a stairwell that creaked and wound and gave out into a long high hallway of shadow. The hallway was lit solely by daylight from a floor to ceiling window they walked away from, and following her Rud again marvelled at Gale’s freshly shaved skull. In his 14 years in the textbook business he’d attended hundreds of teacher conferences and twice had fancied he’d glimpsed her, only with hair. But he had never chased after his glimpses. Even if she had turned out to be Gale, Rud had assumed that she would fail to remember him, or suspect he was only trying to sell her a textbook. Perhaps he should have as, since he did not flirt, he otherwise would have had nothing to say. Until now.

The problem was, how to say it. He listened to the soles of their shoes cry and knock on the wooden floorboards—her sneakers, his wingtips. How could he say that he knew now almost for certain what several months before he’d only previously guessed, a hunch that had spread over him when he had read the obituary of her father in the newspaper, and had felt the shudder of recognition at its lack of details, mentioning no cause, no service, no place of burial.
They neared the end of the hallway. Forget it, a voice told Rud, because you don’t know for certain and you can’t ask. The important thing is that even with her absurd shaved head Gale is still Gale and you are walking with her to her office and jesus here we are. Gale took her keys out of the pocket of her windbreaker, and, as she unlocked her office door, Rudyard counseled himself, do not stop talking, or she will hear the beat of your heart.

"In you go," she said. She tilted slightly at her waist and gestured. Then she followed him inside.

Inside the office by force of habit Rud scanned the titles rowed on shelves about the walls, seeking out the competition. Fowler’s Modern English Usage, The Oxford Companion to English Literature. As per usual, Rud thought, glossing over the next shelf. Except his eyes did a double-take at the first titles rowed there. The Gospel According to Zen. Living by Zen, Dying by Zen. And Mystics and Zen Masters by the poet and Trappist monk Father Thomas Merton.

He turned away from the shelves as Gale unlooped the whistle from around her neck and tossed it onto her desk. He wanted to ask her about the books on Zen--after all, this was a Catholic School--when he noticed a series of stark pencil sketches taped to the bare walls that met in the other corner. The sketches weren’t in frames. Although they certainly deserve to be, Rud thought. He counted two, four, six, seven. No, eight. A row of portraits, he realized. Except he’d never seen such spare line-drawings.
Some with no more than three or four lines. Like sumi-e, Japanese line drawings, except close-ups of men's faces.

Rud squinted at the closest. That was Hemingway of course. Flanked on one side by London, Jack. On the other side a bearded sage, probably Homer. And beside Homer? Rud leaned nearer. A haunted hollowed-out face, grim and ascetic whoever it was. And next to that, a young large-eyed boy in profile, with an almost familiar face and a long cascade of curls. But what about this one? Blank. White and utterly blank.

Blank? Rud waited for a face to rise up out of the whiteness. When it did not he turned to ask a question he hadn't yet formulated. Gale too stared at the blank white paper.

"My, my dad," she started, not taking her eyes off it. Her lip trembled. "I promised myself," she said, "To draw him by the first anniversary of his..." Her voice strained. Beneath her grey windbreaker her shoulders cringed. Her lips trembled and she pinched them until they whitened.

Good Lord. Rud turned away. Back to the blankness of the page. Any remaining doubt was swept away: Gale's rage in the lounge; her shaved head; and now this, the unbearable weight of her task, a weight all the more terrible because of the self-inflicted deadline.

Rud's thoughts inched forward. "My father too," he said. Did she understand this barest of confessions? He must do more than hint. "Nearly three years ago." His
chest rose and fell with his breathing, and the lining of his tweed jacket rustled against his shirt. He knew with dread that his next words—the suicide words—would, if they were the wrong words, fall from his lips like flightless birds.

For a moment he said nothing. Instead he touched the blank page on the wall, brushed the paper with the tips of his fingers.

"This is going to sound crazy," he said after a long blink of memory, "but my father loved paper. Drawing paper." Gale nodded at him without looking at him. "He loved to thrum the edges. To square the corners. Bought me sheafs and sheafs to do my homework. My 'studies' as he called them—" Rud felt the grip of his father’s work saddened hand on his knee. The fondness. He smiled. "--which I never did."

"Never," Gale said. She stood as immaculate as a reflection in a flawless mirror. A sense possessed Rud that if he moved, if slowly he raised his right arm, she would raise her left. She did not. She kept staring past, her eyes cold and clear.

"Never," she repeated, "is the ever at the end of forever. That’s what my father used tell me. Now I think they are only words. Traps." The blue of her eyes, paled now by pain, touched on Rud’s, and she ran her fingers across the bare skin of her skull as if she still had hair and Rud realized she was sweating. "I’d come home from my
run, longer than usual but not much, only a moment, and a firetruck was parked in the driveway and I thought that’s okay Dad’s a fireman but then I saw it wasn’t a fire truck but a paramedic truck and I, they were standing in a circle, there, right there in the garage, and I...

She took a deep breath. Rud reached out to soothe her but she drew away. She looked at his still outstretched hand, her shoulder, the space hanging between.

"I’m sorry," she said. "It’s just that my shrink, she says once I start telling the story to make sure I finish. Therapy."

"Me, I too," said Rud.

"I, I was just there for the week," Gale continued. "At home. The Saturday of Labor Day weekend. So hot, and the garage so cold, dark, the rafters, the circle of the firemen standing or kneeling by Dad’s car, the cement floor so cold. He, he--"

Her voice broke, and she sobbed. She squeezed her temples with her clenched fists. Gently Rud cupped her shoulders in his hands and pulled her close. She laid her palms flat on his chest and stopped him.

"I will finish," she said softly to the ceiling.

Rud let go of her. She took another deep breath, and this seemed to settle her as if her soles had just now touched the earth.

"But first," she said, "are you hungry?"

"What?"
"Really. Don’t laugh. I’m feeling more than a bit dizzy. My blood sugar. I’m hypoglycemic."

Rud checked his watch. It said barely past eleven but odd as it seemed, he was indeed hungry and suddenly very thirsty. He began to suggest he buy her an expense-account lunch in town but Gale shook her head. She pulled open her desk drawer and lifted out a single hotplate. She set it on a four-inch thick copy of the 1970 New York White Pages, plugged it into the wall-socket. From a jug thermos in the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet she filled a copper kettle, placed the kettle on the burner and sat two china cups squatting onto saucers. All the while she never once spoke and Rud honored her silence. She moved about her tight square office with deliberate movements, neither rushing nor searching, Rud thought, not like a ballet exactly but like a graceful chant. And she was practical: Rud knew that a weighted-down phone book is virtually fire-proof because air cannot seep in between the tissue-thin pages. Plus, with it being New York, you could look up the famous, his boyhood hero:

**Mantle, M.** 7 Rupert Place Bx 293-4300

The kettle whistled. Gale prepared the tea. While it steeped she unpacked a lettuce-and-tomato sandwich and a rhubarb-bran muffin from a union lunchpail with K.F.D. printed on the side. She cut the sandwich and muffin in half and arranged each of the two small meals on a white paper napkin.
This was too much, Rud thought. I can’t eat half her lunch. I’m a gentleman. Born in England. An English gentleman. I shall gallantly refuse. But then Gale straightened and turned her back to him.

Now she faced the bookshelf behind her desk. Rud could see over her shoulder but not what was on the shelf. She placed her palms together with her fingertips just under her eyes and slowly bowed, revealing on the bookshelf a jade Buddha sitting lotus with downcast eyes. Unconsciously Rud clasped his hands in front of his hips. Gale bowed slowly again, then turned and bowed to Rud. She sat. He sat, and they ate in silence.

After they’d finished and Gale had wiped the teapot and the cups and saucers clean, Rud pointed to the line-drawings.

"May I?" he asked.

Gale nodded. Now Rud examined each of the line drawings much closer. He stared at the hollowed ascetic face.

"Thomas Chatterton. At ten. At seventeen, cyanide. At seventeen."

Rudyard nodded.

"That," Gale said, her voice almost a moan, "was the last I drew."

Again Rud glanced at the white sheet that remained for her father’s yet undrawn portrait, the whiteness deep and bottomless and staring back at him with a desperation he could almost hear. He averted his eyes. He trailed his sight back along the row of portraits, struggling to divine some alternate order to their lineup, say a chronology, an alphabet, or a roster. He ached to discover a different way for her to see them, anything other than the inexorable order in which she had drawn them, some small way to lessen the weight of Gale’s deadline.

Yes, that was it. A roster. A baseball lineup. It would cheer her. Chatterton. Chatterton would be, the bat boy. Hemingway, sucking in his gut, in the bullpen. And Homer? The catcher. Wait. That was impossible. Wasn’t he blind? Ah, the umpire. Gale would laugh at that. Anyway, had Homer really committed suicide? Or just a few of him? But what about these? Where would they play? Rudyard bent closer. Jack London and--his mind choked as a stabbing burn, beginning at a point between his breastbone and his heart, engulfed his thoughts. He heard Gale’s voice:

"Yukio Mishima. He--"
"I know," he said hoarsely. "How my father." The words left his mouth but never penetrated the baffle of vibration growing in his ears. Mishima. Seppuku. Disembowelment. DEAR SON FORGIVE ME ALL MY LIFE And in his feet Rud stood watch against the first sign of imbalance, the carpet shifting as if he were riding a wave signaling the vertigo that had not visited him for many many months now. And he closed his eyes ready to do as Dr. Glaister had prescribed, to push his breath down beyond his lungs, his stomach, his groin, his thighs, down through the muscle and blood and bone of his legs until it balanced and settled at his feet, steadying him with the sly ballast of will.

The vertigo did not arise. He opened his eyes to find a tear arcing slowly across the curve of each of Gale’s cheeks.

"Do you know the parable of the mustard seed?" she asked.

"Yes."

For a moment both of them waited, blinking, not still really but leaning towards each other over the brink of an embrace.

"Fetch a seed, a mustard seed, from each house where no one has died," Rud said.

"Where no one knows grief," Gale said.

"Jesus?"
"The Buddha." She waved her hand, indicating her line drawings. "I thought these might be mine, but--" She shook her head no, wiped each of her eyes with the back of her wrist and said,

"Do people ask you why?"

"Yes," Rud answered. "I used to get ticked off when people asked why. I read all the books, the statistics, the classifications. Schneidemann, Camus. The articles: 'Will Mice Commit Suicide?' Jesus. I mean, mice? What on earth could anyone gain from tormenting mice to the point of--?"

He shook his head. "Then I realized how once when I was talking to Troy about the suicide of his cousin, I’d asked him why."

There, he’d said it. He wanted to say 'Troy' out loud again but didn’t.

"Anyway," he continued, "Now when people ask why?, I either keep my tongue, or if I’m feeling lousy about it I’ll say, Ask Durkheim." Rud paused. He took a deep breath. "Have you ever read James Hillman? Suicide and the Soul?"

Gale shook her head no. Rud started to speak, to suggest he post it to her or better drop it off next time he was in the area, but a short bell rang.

"Three minute warning," Gale explained. "I’ve got Hamlet next period."

"Hamlet."
"Yes--it’ll give me a lift." She stood at her filing cabinet again and found a rubberbanded sheaf of papers. "And we haven’t even talked about our in-between."

"We will," Rud said, trying to sound sure.

She closed her filing cabinet drawer. "Gale," she said to herself, "Better check." She fingerwalked through the paperclipped corners of her papers. "I heard you and Troy won scholarships to Cornell."

"Sort of," Rud said, surprised and pleased that sometime in the past she’d asked about him.

"Sort of?"

"Troy played hockey."

"Ding," she said, still counting of her pages.

"And I played baseball," Rud said and squirmed because while this wasn’t a lie it wasn’t precisely true either. Troy had won a full four-year hockey scholarship while Rud had only made the baseball team as a walk-on.

"The boy with glove," she said. "Catching even snowballs."

"Yes," he said, remembering how, in eighth grade she’d thrown him one.

Another bell rang, longer and louder this time. The hallways exploded with the glee of babble and feet. He turned to leave. Gale stood directly in front of him, her breath sweet from the rhubarb in the muffins. She pressed the rubberbanded sheaf onto him.
"You probably get this all the time," she said apologetically. "But please, please have a look at this and tell me what you think."

"Yes, yes of course." He slipped the manuscript into his bookbag and followed her out and along the hallway throbbing with students. But it wasn’t until after they’d said good-bye at the front doors and that he’d be in touch soon, after he had climbed in his car and was waiting while the cold engine idled, that he pulled out her manuscript and read the title: Mustard Seeds: An Anthology of Literary Suicides.