Another way of life

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The University of Montana

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Another Way of Life

by

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When I was younger, while musing in church half attentive, at times it would occur to me: how was it possible for creatures of innocence to fall? The persuasions of the serpent are entirely cynical. How could Eve believe them? How could someone who had walked with God and spoken face to face, believe it was possible to become his equal by eating apples?

If our will is divided, if we are flawed, it can’t be through paradise lost, but redemption incomplete or creation needing to be completed through acceptance of time. This is what Eve did.

Eden could not suffice. There was neither time nor fertility, and in the absence of these, memory as partial and unreliable as a dream. Eve must have taken upon herself an act of completion.

At times when surrounded by the hateful glitter of the city, that looks out on the world as through a million prised insect eye, I wonder if we were not Satan made and God tempted: if God did not come upon us in the guise of the serpent, tempting a race of insect people into time, splitting us out of a hard, glittering shell.

Satan’s kingdom was replete with silent music compressed in a crystal sphere. It was a garden without
time in which music formed an ever sweeter and deeper silence; in the same way that white light may contain every color and yet appear colorless. This silent music contained in itself every melody ever formed. Every sound made by every creature in the garden was foreordained, and added its own richness to a harmony already complete in itself.

This was our first home. We were created by Satan out of that music of perceptible silence that contradicting itself, rested on a knife edge between time and eternity. Adam and Eve were created by him, in appearance more bird than lizard, more insects than birds. He laughed to himself at this excellent little joke, a parody of the angel beauty that he had lost. The two creatures had iridescent wings and were covered in a living nacreous armour. His chest, her breast reflected a cold fire back to the sun. Her cleft, his crest were barbed chitinious things. Along their legs and ridge of the back there were spines and feathers, each with an eye of green and gold. When they flew, they made a sound, if it could be heard, like glass breaking. And surrounding them always was a sharp and sweet fragrance; indescribable but like the taste of cinnamon.

They had a beauty hard to comprehend now that the world has left eternity. Their movements created an
iridescent symphony of colors. Their brittle bodies had nectar coursing through the veins, their breath was like perfume. They lived solely for their voiceless song and sterile embrace, repeated without joy or fatigue from morning till night.

Satan, in the beginning had said, "Be timeless Eve." And thus it was God who took upon himself the form of the great tempter, lying in wait one night in the bottom of the garden while Satan lay sleeping inside a mirror. The lustrous snake came slithering on his belly, 'For he so loved the world that he humbled himself and we were born of woman.'

He came offering a sweet and bitter fruit. Among the sparkling gemstones God lay singing of time and His song was not voiceless, for Eve to her amazement heard. "Cry only once Eve," he said, "and your tears will shatter this dome of glass." Looking into the serpent's kindly eyes, listening to his song, she could not refrain from weeping. The shell and feathers split off her back and the first day began with a soft rain and the sound of our mother weeping. The gems fell into blossom. The sea found its voice in the fishes, the birds were spoken by the air. The fire gave up insects and the earth heard the first animal cry. And God looked upon his work and saw it was good.
***

We came up the sea slug way. We have in our bodies atoms, tides and residues of everything that has ever lived. We are born entangled in a web, already a billion years old before we draw a single breath. We can struggle against the web, evoke paradise and die, or see ourselves translucently. We are not divided but related, not flawed but overwhelmed with gifts.

To think that our original state was timelessness, is to cling to innocence in the face of overwhelming grace. If God had wanted to create us single and entire, He would have done that. He made us as He did as a testament. If He has not spared fertility or invention in the world, how can we dream of paradise? We need to seek a principle that gives totally and yet remains itself- a garden unwalled, ordered.

But who can possess such love? Who can love the murderers and thieves? Who can heal the divisions between men and women? And yet these pitiful little walled gardens of philosophy and politics, of theology, of ideals, of hopes are no answer. Though I don’t know how, I will neither look for paradise nor accept the world. I will suffer with it like a midwife waiting for birth. Where everything hangs in the balance and only a little can be done.
The Uncertainty Principle

I don't know which is easier to believe, that I spoke to an angel or I'm mad. I suppose I prefer to be mad. For if it was true then I don't know what to make of anything. It has the kind of malice that only God could be capable of. That rings true.

I am simply a middle aged professor. I am not famous, certainly no one that heaven should be watching. I will admit that I was at my wits end. In his fifties a man's capacity to tell stories to himself falls behind his capacity to disbelieve them. That's an awkward thing. But if God lets little children be beaten to death by drunken fathers, I don't know why he should pay any particular attention to me. I don't want to accept illuminations from such a person. Women and children first.

Is there anything in my past that would justify the visit of angels? Not a thing. I am a former professor of physics who abused his students and neglected his wife. And then I got nastier because I wasn't at all what I thought I should be. So I wrote grandiose conclusions. I allowed my students to manufacture data out of thin air. And they caught me. The fact that I was a lecher and a drunk bothered no one. But moving the decimal point to the right in support of an fictitious and interesting
conclusion was unforgivable.

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Unlike many people I can locate precisely when I knew things were going wrong. I had been seeing a bright young student. We had been slipping around. She was good in bed, neither pretty or not. She thought I would help her career, and I thought she would be an adventure. She was pug nosed and and had a way of crossing her eyes when she thought hard which was utterly charming.

She was serious about her work and good at it. I would come over to her place in the early evening and there she would be, lying on her bed, smoking, shirtless and in jeans. The keyboard would be propped on her stomach and she would be staring at a monitor mounted over the bed. Seduction was not difficult. But as soon as we were finished she would roll over and reach for the keyboard, gravid with some insight that had occurred just before climax. It was not flattering, however admirable.

I suggested that we get away from the city. I told the customary lies and we left for a weekend of camping. She kept talking all the way up about some article she had just read in *Nature*. For the first time I realized that I had not been cared about my field for some time. I worked hard, but I didn't care. I had thought I was too busy
teaching. And I complained bitterly. Now as she talked fervently and scribbled calculations which I was supposed to glance at while keeping us on the road, I realized that I was waiting for a wink, for a sign from her. I had assumed that she was trying to impress the old professor. But her eyes glistened, she was breathless. This was real to her. What a fool.

And then I remembered I had been that way once. I had taken month long bus trips across the country, a notebook in my lap, writing calculations. Enjoying the loneliness that made total concentration possible.

I asked her if she really believed in this stuff. She was startled.

"Of course. Remember, 'The goal of science is to assimilate yourself to the objective order of the universe.'"

"I can't remember saying anything that stupid"

"Why can't you take my work seriously?"

"I don't know if I take my own work seriously."

"That's a lot of bull. You can't accept a woman with ideas. And I'm getting just a little bit tired."

"That's not true. Sometimes I just wonder what this all amounts to. Well not that. I just feel tired today. You do good work. I mean that."

"Don't patronize me."
We entered Frazier Park feeling at odds with one another. She was hurt, thinking that I hadn’t been paying attention. I was not showing respect for her ideas, because she was a woman. I felt like I had been on an ice flow for some time, slowly moving out to sea. The gap between the shore and myself had seemed unimportant. But I had passed the point of no return. There was no way I could reach this person and her enthusiasm. For her the world was tangible and solid. I was moving toward some other place.

We were out of sorts with each other when we began to walk through the Snake river gorge. The path was uneven, winding up and down. You had to watch your footing. The need to pay attention to where I was stepping began to make me feel dull and more depressed. There was an arbitrary variety like a child’s handwriting in the forms of the rocks and roots which crossed the path. I slowed down and fell behind Cathy asking myself why I had come.

I looked up at her ahead of me on the trail, her figure and carriage so much like a girl, particularly from behind. She had become like a memory of desire.

A white-gold light filtered through the trees. The light streamed through the upper branches picking out birds, leaves, stones and ripples in the water. The gold color seemed to glow from within each of them. The water
was becoming bright silver with areas of dark, dark green near the banks. As the light began to fade we came on strangely shaped flowers five feet tall.

It was getting too dark to see when we turned back. Cathy was in front again, walking at a steady, rapid pace. I was unable to keep up with her. In the dim light it was like a dream of death.

As we climbed out of the valley I looked back over the gorge. The patch of forest nearest us was nearly black. In the distance and on the opposite bank it was still golden green. I felt relieved.

We were both silent as we walked onto the bridge looking down over the falls. We spent a long time watching the pink and gold patterns in the water. The thought of jumping crossed my mind. I could vividly imagine the sensation of striking the rock, barely cushioned by the shallow water. I saw the mingling of blood and clear water in the shadows of the trees. I was transfixed, not trusting myself to move. Cathy was watching the last bit of sunset.

I told Cathy I didn’t feel like camping and the I needed to be alone. "Fine," she said. "Why don’t you leave me here and I’ll hitch into town on Sunday."

I spent the weekend drinking brandy and working my way through the article that Cathy had liked. I guess I
always meant to patch things up. I thought I would come up with some brilliant variation on the line she had taken, as a kind of peace offering. I couldn't think of a thing.

I began drinking a lot, hanging around in bars during much of the day and into the night, talking about God, the universe and the emptiness of it all.

In the meantime the grad students were doing their own thing. Most of the time I was nowhere near my lab. Records weren't kept and apparently some results were picked out of the air. My team published some findings that put particle physics research on its ear for about a month. I really hadn't kept track of what they were doing. I just signed off on it. *Newsweek* ran a piece on us. But no one could replicate what we had done. Since there were plenty of people who didn't like my style, there was an investigation by the University.

The suspicions pointed in the direction of my team leader Peter Campion. I don't know what possessed me to put him in charge. He was a pot smoker and a crystal gazer: a brilliant mathematician who believed in spirits. I thought it was funny. He used to say, "Mind determines matter, what you seek, you'll find." He claimed to have demonstrated that concentrated meditation could determine the results of quantum experiments. Ordinarily, in quantum work one can only specify the probability that an event
will occur, but there is no way of knowing which way a particular particle in a particular situation will travel. Campion, appeared to have demonstrated that concentrated thought could alter the probabilities. I suppose I was drinking too much at the time to have fully appreciated what a hornets nest I was going to create. If true, my results would have turned physics, psychology, and most of what we think we know upside down. It was the kind of result you check and recheck for years. I signed off and went to lunch.

Campion decided to take me with him when the investigation began to look grim. Considering my drinking, and some of the things I had been saying about the permeable boundary between science and art, the claim that I had approved of his strange methods was something people wanted to believe.

A hearing was held. I wasn't fired because the only things proved against me were carelessness and stupidity. The cynics said firing a faculty member on those grounds would have set a bad precedent. But after the hearing I knew I was finished as a researcher. I lost my NSF grant and my wife finally left me.

I lived off my savings, read Proust in the morning, drank in the Kit Kat lounge, watching the young woman trace slow circles in the dusty blue air with their naked
limbs till late at night. I wrote an essay about the Objective Order of the Universe.

One night an angel appeared. I may have been drunk, I may have been hallucinating. I say again, there is nothing to justify the apparition.

I still continue to drink. Except now I worry more. I live in furnished apartments and take long Greyhound rides from coast to coast. I write calculations on the back of envelopes, trying to prove that angels can not appear. And sometimes I change my mind I try to prove that they can. In my spare time I make a little money writing about fly fishing.

I can't settle down and I can't go forward. As I move down the highway, breathing the stale, sweet, Greyhound air, I wonder how many of my fellow travelers are victims of grace. Perhaps all of us carrying our belongings in tattered luggage, sleeping in furnished rooms, unbathed, living in bus terminals, have been visited as I was. I have asked cautiously. Some said yes and some said no. The yeses did not seem to come from reliable sources. But its comforting to think that I'm not the only one.

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But it was the most extraordinary thing. I awoke in the middle of the night and there it was, in my bedroom.
She was short and plump with a sort of a crazy afro. She didn't look intelligent. She had freckles and a toothy grin. Hanging down to her knees was a loose white peasant dress. There was a light surrounding her and she had a yo yo, sitting at the foot of my bed, chewing a wad of gum.

She went through the same routine over and over again. Three chomps on the gum, then down would go the yo yo. It would spin for a second, she would give a couple of chomps, then flick her wrist and bring it back. I watched her go through this entire cycle twice before I could even say to myself, "What the hell is going on?"

And she looked at me and said, "I've come for your soul Mr. Becker."

I thought, "My God I'm hallucinating now."

"I'm an angel."

I said, "This is so real."

"Of course it is. If I were an hallucination could I reason? Watch now. Socrates is a man, All men are mortal. Therefore Socrates is mortal. That's deduction. I could explain the Fibonacci series. Or why don't you just call off atomic weights and I'll give you the elements."

"I'm talking to myself."

"You do it all the time."

All the while she was playing with the yo yo.

I could see the bed sag under her and she was
actually conversing with me. I thought, "Maybe she’s a practical joke." But I had a very strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

So I said, "What do you want? Stop that."

And she laughed.

"I’m calling the police," I said. I wasn’t sure what I’d tell them.

She looked at me and said, "I’ve come for your SOOOOL."

"Shit,

"You look very funny."

She made a face at me then and put the yo yo down. "It’s a fact, my friend, that everyone who prays is given an answer. Mind determines matter. Finders seekers. Even you. We’ve watched you sneak a prayer."

"I’ll kill that son of a bitch Campion."

She gave the yo yo a spin and continued.

"I’ve come to hear your problem. You want the objective order of the universe? I’m the field representative. What is it you’d like to know?"

She waited for a minute, chewing loudly.

"Cat got your tongue? A cosmic cramp in the toes?"

She grasped my big toe through the sheet. "This little man found a quasar. This little man dug up bones. This little man found
I felt like a fool. It had to be a prank. It wasn't funny.

Then she said, "If it's a practical joke how did I get in? How did I get through your door? Do you want a sign?"

There was a pitcher of water by my bed. It started to float through the air. The pitcher came toward me, tipped and started to pour over my head. I reached up and grabbed it. The water was cold and the bed was wet. All I could say is, "Damn." And then, "What do you want?"

"Does it matter? Why ask stupid questions?"

"What are you doing here?"

"The devil was busy tonight, so I came."

"I'm supposed to sell my soul to the devil?"

"You're not paying attention. I represent the other party."

"God?"

"Yes, Divinity."

"You're treating me like a child. I'm a scientist. I've struggled. And all you do is come along and say God exists. Be happy. Is that the idea? Well it doesn't make any sense."

"It's not supposed to. You enjoy your pain."

"That's not true. It's just like God, if there were
one, and I'm not sure what the hell you are, to destroy a man's dignity and then throw mercy after it. That's the idea? Beware of knowledge of good and evil. Well I've eaten the apple and I can't forget it." I was angry. The malice of God is astounding.

"You people complain that God is silent. And when he speaks that doesn't fit either. What can I say?"

"I presume you want me to repent. Well I don't know what to repent. I don't even know what I regret. So I guess you're just going to have to damn me"

She gave her yo yo a flip and let it come back.

"There isn't any hell. There are just people who turn away. I don't know what happens. No one's angry at them."

"This doesn't make any sense at all." I felt like crying.

The angel said, "Why does it oppress you? There are no demons."

"God gives us reason. But things don't make sense. He gives us brains but makes us too stupid to be kind to one another. He gives us freedom but ties our minds to the emotions of apes. We are here on a speck of rock ...., " I couldn't continue. "I can't afford to believe in you. If I did I'd kill myself."

"And where is the objective order of the universe?"

"You, just don't understand. I don't think even God
understands. You don't prove anything. You don't change anything."

"I don't need to change anything. And I can't. But the question isn't me. You are a strange class of beings. You keep pretending you don't understand. And He keeps pretending to redeem you. And you keep pretending not to understand."

"But that's not the the point. It's not a question of arguments." She had a broad smile on her face and it got broader. "What we are talking about is the objective order. The harmony of the spheres. Would you like to hear them Johnny? Watch closely. This will be my last effect."

I could hear distant music. Then, what sounded like a drumroll. But very, very faint. It was a couple of minutes before I could make out anything. She got off my bed and began swaying a little and giving little leaps and hops and twirls. I felt my legs begin to twitch. Though I still couldn't make out a melody.

"Get up Johnny," she said. She tugged on my arm and pulled me out of bed.

"Get ready to dance. You will hear the music of the spheres. It's a catchy tune."

It got louder and then at last I could recognize it. I was so angry I wanted to kick her.

"Now" she cried. And the music came on loud enough to
shake the building. It was John Philip Sousa—"The Stars and Stripes Forever."

She was laughing and high stepping all around the room, twirling and marching up and over the bed. I felt the music take hold of and was determined to stay stock still. I hate marches. It's all cheap emotion but your feet want to move and your skin gets goose bumps anyway.

She looked at me as she marched straight up the wall and capered across the ceiling and said, "You've got to dance."

I felt a power come over my legs and though I fought it, I found myself doing a clumsy imitation of her dance up and down the room."

"Stop that damn music."

People were pounding on the ceiling in the apartment below. The angel was laughing so hard that she couldn't talk. There were little silver tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I rest my case. The proof is done."

When she regained her composure she came over and touched my arm.

"That's the only difference between men and angels. You struggle and we dance. But the music is there whether you like it or not."

"You're too impressed with your own ideas. Even
angels have no reasons. Even the angels have sadness."

"You may can make of this whatever you want. Don't say any more," she said. "You never think when you talk. Farewell."

She became indistinct, like a bad television picture. Then the shadow that was left began to course with waves of color like the aurora borealis. It became thinner and began to fade when all of a sudden there was a flash and a column of bright light shot up and splashed over like a fountain, ending in little sparks which lingered for a moment before they disappeared. There was a sound like a bell. As I was standing with my mouth open, I heard her laughter, which swelled and faded away.

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I suppose you might ask how I could take any of this seriously. It might seem to be a drunken hallucination. I don't say it isn't. But on the other hand I'm not prepared to say that it is.

I'm a physicist. I believe in baryons, hadrons, mesons, bosons and leptons. I've never seen these things and never will. I've had to accept quarks, which have properties labeled, "truth," "beauty," and "charm." There are "up" quarks and "down" quarks, as well as "sideways" ones too. There is even a property called "strangeness."
Though its not really what you think it is. In the old days they gave things dignified Greek and Latin names. But not any more. No one is really sure where any of this is going.

One of the grand old men of Heisenberg’s generation once said, "The universe is not only stranger than we conceive, it is stranger than we can conceive." It amuses me to think that perhaps when we crack open the secret of the quarks, there will be an angel with a yo yo waiting for us. Of course even then she will be stranger than we conceive or stranger than we can conceive. And so it will go.

None of this of course gets me off the bus. I’m still a pilgrim. I can’t build my life on this dream and I don’t seem to be able to dismiss it. God is a prankster, there’s no denying that.
AN ALCHEMICAL MEDITATION

(a personal exploration of the themes and symbols of alchemy)

NIGREDO

The slow, steady, indifferent process of poisoning oneself with cigars, magazines, trivial books, overeating, oversleeping, to produce a helpless vertigo of body and mind. Day to day among cracked and stained walls, the empty hallways, one can only say yes and no. Over and over, each day one says yes and no. Death shall not touch me because I am dying. Forever and ever I shall live as I am, just like a stone, a sunrise.

At times it is as if one could hear blind fish singing in the night. I fear and desire sleep. A sudden, cool, harsh wind blowing through the brain. So much concealed, compacted in that cavern. To let it all mingle with the minerals, the birds and the sand. Myself to flow like water, another fact, a history, a fragment of a journal. Simply to be. It would not be death, only coolness, release, letting life be lived horizontally. A way to relieve the empty fecundity of every hour.

The strange transparent fish from the depths, all spines and webs, colors like soap bubbles, the fish from the depths come singing late at night of sin and
redemption. It is as if what I desire most is to tear apart my body, my mind. As if I want to find out in disintegration of every possible kind, every possible suffering, what the world is like and what I am made of. Surely life is a fever and a dream. We live like someone who has lost something and after looking for little while, ransacks the house in frustration and despair.

I am entirely without purposes of my own, drawn on by inertia on the steel rails of habit, surprised at every turn by the inevitable. In conducting a dissection of my own soul, I find that I don't exist. I belong to a generation of absent men and women gesturing on the abandoned stage of a lost way of life. What ambitions I have are a function of the pointless efficiency of the senses, freed from the tyranny of ideas. I see on television, I read in the newspaper of life lived somewhere else. For a moment I want to live there too. But shortly, the wish is gone. I am a Pavlovean dog who can't remember why the bell rings, a Skinnerean mouse, all at once set outside the maze. Such a mouse must be a mystical mouse. A mouse struggling for hope.

How well we disguise ourselves with our stupidity. We each design our own clownishness, abusing body and spirit as if God would not recognize us. Perhaps the day of judgement will come simply when God calls us by name.
Who is so foolish to believe he will know us beneath the disguise. We hope he won't. And yet we hope he will.

SULPHUR

"...sulpher represents the active substance of the sun, or in psychological language, the motive factor in consciousness: on the one hand the will...on the other hand compulsion..." (Jung, *Mysterium Conjunctionis*, 1963, p.128)

Babel Revisited

The welder is a quiet man. The tower has a mile dimension on either side. All day long you hear the soft hiss of the torches. The men use rough wooden ladders between the stories. There is no time for anything more. They move always upward. When the sun goes down on a night before a storm there is a strange sadness; black cross beams against the orange sky, and then those countless little ladders, like a small girl's voice in the twilight. The people camp on platforms between the girders. Everything is temporary.

The welding torches never pop or sputter. Men who don't lay a steady quiet bead are not welcome. A small puddle, a wound between two butted ends of steel. At the touch of a rod it closes, healing itself. It is like a pair of lips rhythmically saying Oh, Oh, Oh.
At each third level the families follow, new platforms are built and God is always just beyond reach. Babel failed because it did not have structural steel. Civilization was too young then. There were still thoughts to think, to tell one another. The welder's minds are empty and clear. Their bodies move through practiced habit. To construct one unit or twenty; the work done by a hundred men or a thousand, it goes on all the same. There is nothing to be said.

At times, just after twilight, the wind comes up and the smell of earth reaches them. It is like memory itself. And then the first star appears, so clear and bright, they feel they can't be far away. The old anger appears. And with it despair. They will climb to heaven and demand from God an accounting.

The day begins once again as he looks into the sun crawling across the firmament and softly begins writing in steel across his sky, his defiance of divine injustice. Yes, as if to serve the heart of a lover on a platter before his own unbelieving eyes.

They are wasps and spider. They poison their women with their metaphysics and their love. Their children feed upon the flesh of their mothers, as their fathers feed.

The tower is like a grid of fine wire that passes through the heart of the welder again and again. Sifting
and homogenizing. Like a potter sifts clay. There are no quiet or empty places in the heart of a welder.

SALT

"It represents the feminine principle of Eros, which brings everything into relationship...salt as the soul or spark of the anima mundi, is in very truth the daughter of the spiritus vegetativus of creation." (Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis, 1963, p.241)

The sea invites us to dream waking like a child. The shells on the shore, mysterious as cats, shining, winking, invite us to share the knowledge beyond the horizon.

Water is infinitely receptive, and powerful. It carries all burdens, takes any form, reflects and embellishes whatever it confronts. When all the earth is opaque at nightfall, it is the last to give up luminescence. It carries every thought of the night sky.

It is that receptivity, that infinite femininity that urges the despairing to rest.

Water is the antidote to the angular rhythms of the soul. It is the contrary to the geometry of the ego. The proud soul that tries to resonate to the musical beauty of water will shatter. The sand is made from stones shattered by the music of the ocean.

Only a light and musical spirit can move with the rhythm of water. Such a man can read its eddies and waves
like an intimate journal. He is a sorcerer.

Water is always in flux and always the same. It recalls the sleep we came from and the dream yet to follow. Looking into flowing water we are left with the pure nameless facts of our lives: to be born, give birth and die. That story is always the same and always different. When one looks into a clear stream, one sees one's face or one sees death. It is a choice one makes.

There are things that seem to promise that we are going somewhere, that there is a story which lies beneath our lives which will offer us meaning if only we find it. The sunrise, and mountaintops give this feeling of purpose and explicability. Sunsets, trees and water deny them. Women understand that these are illusions. Men seem to need to believe in them.

MERCURIUS (The Fourth Dimension)

"The unifying agent is the spirit Mercurius..."

(Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis, 1963, p.13)

We hear rumors of other realms, higher realms, of grace and redemption. We have a sense of waiting. And yet we pretend to be ignorant.

I am for obstinate saints. The plaint ones have had their day. I am for stupid saints. There have been too many thoughtful ones. The obstinate and stupid ones will pretend not to see and hear, as God pretends not to see
and hear. They will not speculate. They will take all of
God's gifts and pretend not to know what they might mean.

It is true I lack faith. And yet I also lack doubt. If
faith isn't possible, I can't deny experience.

I'm unsure of what I doubt. I am flayed alive,
dissolved in things beyond my understanding. Without
either faith or doubt the dark night of the soul is a
twilight of intimations. Even an oyster shell, a hint of a
breeze can seem like an Annunciation hidden by a
translucent door.

As we perfect the stillness and obscurity of our
ignorance, we become more knowledgeable. God has no
symmetry, that is how we know him. Death is his mirror;
for it destroys the symmetry of the life course. Death
strips us, gives us over to aloneness. In the presence of
death we are this body in this space and time. We are
fixed in a finite span, between a beginning and an end. We
are then prepared for beauty. Just as beauty, burns away
what is opaque and brings one into contact with death.
Beauty will not allow us to be what we think we are. There
is a glimpse of how the divisions of our lives, of flesh
and spirit, or reason and passion might be transcended. It
provides proof that we are not ourselves. For a man closed
in on himself, a beautiful woman walking down the street,
simply by her existence is a challenge. She, by her
beauty, drives his spirit to the edge of non-existence or the brink of life.

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At one time, Truth, went abroad on earth ready to teach and console. She journeyed to one of her temples where her image, that of Sophia the Beautiful was kept. She presented herself at the gates and rang. The priest who answered was speechless. The goddess herself had come. Who would believe it? He conducted her immediately to the abbot, shouting all the way, "She has come! She has come!" The abbot fell down at her feet. All of the brotherhood was called together. She sat in their midst in the courtyard in the cool of the evening. No one spoke a word. There was silence but for the splashing of a the fountains and the murmur of the acacia trees outside of the walls. Every man felt a strange and nearly overpowering sensual desire, that made them feel inadequate and confused.

This goddess was so clearly a woman and she affected them all as a beautiful woman. What they felt seemed blasphemous. The hopelessness of being in love with a goddess made them despair. The learned theologians felt somehow under attack. The holy abbot felt foolish. The scholars felt bent-backed and small. If she were an earthly woman they could have sent her away as a
distraction. Or one or two might have found a way to sleep with her. In any case they could have pulled the thorn of her presence from their flesh. They were unsure of themselves. There was nothing to be done to express this desire. The night was intensely fragrant, and all at once none of the monks was sure of where the boundaries of their skin lay. And still she sat among them, confounding them.

The silence might have gone on indefinitely if the goddess had not spoken. "Without desire truth is hidden." Her gown dropped from her shoulders and she stood before them. There was a moment of silence. And then as a single man the assembly rose up to stone her, crying that she was an impostor, a harlot. Had she not exercised her infinite capacity for disguise, she would have been killed.

The first time this happened, she dismissed it as provincialism. But after the third, and that at her chief shrine, she was discouraged. She felt the need to cleanse herself of the world. And yet she could not entirely abandon the faithful; those that had truly loved her. Had there been three or four?

And so she set off on a journey. And each place she passed, on which her foot rested or her hand caressed, was marked in her own script: the fissures in rocks, the
spiral of shells, the growth of leaves and flowers. In this inventory of the world, she found again her peace and wove into the life of each her name. Then she went back beyond the stars and has hardly been seen again.

CONJUNCTION OF OPPOSITES

"The result of the synthesis was consequently conceived by the adept as self-knowledge." (Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis, 1963, p.460)

There is something one faces as middle age begins. The philosophers have called it dread, the fact of death. But any name we give it overdramatizes. It is ordinary, ordinary as wild geese against a darkening sky. And it is icy and sweet.

There is an awareness of time passing. But transience is not an enemy. It is a mocker, but also washes clean. If nothing were to change, life would be even more secret than it is now; each thing encased in an aureole of its own beauty. Even if sexual ecstasy could last forever, one would begin to disintegrate, crack like a prism, become an endless sweet dream of self, wandering a labyrinth, pursuing oneself.

I believe in harmony, the polyphony of many voices. While time passes, I may play, I may listen. I embrace a simultaneous meeting and parting, in a single moment.
Each thing has this quality. It is the central question: the answer determines your life. We hear an echo, a silence, which seems to be the shadow of something unnamable. It is that silence, that nothingness which makes our bodies light, frees us from the closed circle of ourselves. For animals, their world is full of sound. Ours is full of silence. It is the silence of time passing. And each man is called to be a listener.

Only man can hear the emptiness between sounds, can feel with the surface of his skin the empty space where he stands, can see the purposelessness of his purposes. This is a joyful science. It is what made David dance before the ark. In the center of it, all faces are strange, unknown, full of beauty. Every object is unfamiliar, the world is full of miracles.

When we look out into the night sky we find an immeasurable vastness. Fire and dust without end, curving back upon itself. It is like a mirror. For the proud man who must walk alone, saying his own praises, it is empty and cold. For one who can accept the polyphony of time, it is beautiful, pure and simply itself.

When we look into night sky it isn't indifference and meaningless we see. It is the souls music. We are not what we think we are. Looking out into infinity, the black, the silver, the red and blue swirling, the gentle
in spirit want to dance. They want to make love, not at
the end of the world, but simply to feel the dance.

When we look out at space it is not emptiness we see
and fear, but in the moment of silence we realize how
fragile, how interconnected our world is. And that can
tear the heart as nothing else can.

***

God did not condemn Satan to any cruel and desolate
place. Hell is, the most beautiful place imaginable. It
is this which he can not endure. He wanders about, torn by
light, committing crimes upon phantoms. God will not allow
him rest in the symmetry of his decay. Punishment would
give him peace.

God knows that even the energy of Satan must begin to
tire. He seems to apply the same strategy with the human
race.
CIRCLES IN SQUARES

Leonardo's drawing embodies the principle that "man is the measure of all things." The square is the symbol of earth, the circle of the divine. Man embodies the proportion of both.

Man stands before the universe calm and self sufficient, certain that in himself he embodies its most secret principle. What he needs to know he only has to rediscover.

Today we see a figure, falling in all directions at once into a void. We see a naked fool, standing within circles in squares, measured and small. "Man the measure" became "man the measured."

We live in a silent vortex of dust and light, precessing toward entropy. At each level of matter there is another beneath it. If there are no limits, there is no proportion. And without proportion, there is nothing but a vortex of appearances, shifting and ephemeral. We have lost faith. We can no longer tell ourselves stories faster than we begin to disbelieve them.

We live outside of time, content to build mirror images of ourselves in the eyes of others. Our perception of our own acts is subject to recursive irony. Like any man starring into a mirror, we have little sense of our own passions. The music of our own limbs, the structure of
thought is largely unknown.

We live in mythic time, infinitely expandable and compressible. We believe in metamorphosis. We are aware of the flow of time only in the rigidity with which it fails to match the pace of our dreams.

What is needed is a fourth dimension to resolve the mirror images into which we are split: to resolve subject and object into a single self.

Mathematically, the ironic incongruity of two symmetrical objects can always be resolved by a rotation through a higher dimension. The fact that we are not ourselves could be resolved if only we knew how to add a dimension to poetry, history and science. Without this dimension, the dialogue with irony continues as we fall twisting in all directions.

And yet, perhaps there are things which we have, yet can not possess. Perhaps the divine proportion is woven so subtly that it can not be distinguished.
MISSING

In the early morning the planes would fly over the house making a sound like ice being scraped off the pale summer sky. Half asleep, I would reach for my wife. It had been nearly two years since the accident, but I still sometimes forgot that she was gone.

I seemed to miss her more than ever. I would walk down the street watching faces, looking into the eyes of strange women, as if I hoped to find her disguised in someone else's flesh. I would sometimes follow couples through the park, trying to remember what it had been like when we were together. Yet I could not remember exactly what she looked like. Details were all I could recall: the feel of her mouth, the scar across her belly.

I missed her, but I didn't know how to start over. I couldn't seem to find a new lover or even how to hold onto most of my old friends. It seemed like the older I got, the less I liked being around men. They talked about things they owned, what they did.

After years of mind work, there didn't seem to be much of myself left to talk about. Once I left the lab, I didn't want to know anything. The women who worked at the bar I frequented could talk for half an hour about a pet bird. I would have reduced the thing to its elements in a minute. But then, there wouldn't have been a conversation.
My colleagues thought I was a prig. Those who knew how much time I spent in the Heidelberg Room though I was I hypocrite.

The women there considered me a bit of a child and sexless. I didn't try to dominate the conversation as a man should. I did little services for them: helped Lynn balance her checkbook, got Linda through freshman calculus. I even did a bit of heavy lifting. I made myself welcome.

Barb once asked me in, after I drove her home while her car was in the shop. But I felt that if I established myself as a male, the circle of women would close against me. I liked her. But I knew that once I was no longer exotic to her, she would not understand me or my work.

***

I don't know what I would have done without work. I was one of the senior members of Carl Stinson's research team on the K5 particle project. We were getting close to the end. Quan at Cal Tech was supposed to be close to publication too, so everyone in our group was working overtime. We didn't want to be beat out.

I was surprised to find that the competition seemed more of a distraction than a spur. Bernie Chang, my only friend in the department, was the only one of us who dared to act as detached as I felt. Bernie always sat in his
office with his feet on the desk playing his saxophone when he was thinking. He never seemed to be in a hurry. And that as much as anything else really pissed the chief off.

Just about everyone in high energy work knew who I was. But I had passed the point where you can say "tomorrow will be different." When you're young you think that a lot.

Sometimes I even wondered if Maureen and I would have stayed together. I think we would. But before she died we were having a lot of trouble. She said I didn't spend enough time with her.

***

The cyclotron at State was a magnificent mess. I suppose it says something about the place. At Cornell they have one barely a yard across. You want to change something in the "D"s you get a screwdriver and take the thing apart. At MIT you sit in another room and push buttons. If you want to change something there is a crane that moves across the ceiling. At State there were wires and switches hanging all over the place, cooling water dripping from the valves. We built the thing. There were no engineers, no gold plating. We understood the whole apparatus. There were tables full of tools, ball peen
hammers, coils of wire, wrenches and ten thousand dollar scanners all in heaps. It was a mess. When you wanted to fix a vacuum you'd drip glyptal on it. There were puddles on the floor.

One day Bernie and I were trying to see if we could smash a neutron in another way, hoping K5 would appear with its neutrino outriders. Normally he was quick. He had a way of tearing into a machine like a badger burrowing. He would fling things on the bench, as if he was going to salvage the thing for scrap. You would swear that he couldn't have any idea of where to find the pieces if he need them. And then as fast as it was dismantled, he was snapping the cover on, ready to throw the switch.

That day he was taking his time. Stinson came in to ask how it was going. "Nearly time for lunch," said Bernie. It was ten in the morning. Stinson slammed the door.

I was looking over the cloud chamber photos for the tenth time, measuring, hoping to see something I hadn't seen before.

"The smart money says that we're not going to make it. Quan's ready to publish. And then Stinson's going to go up in god-almighty smoke."

I looked up, this was the first time anyone had said that.

Bernie was sighting down the end of his screwdriver,
like Ahab, looking for whales.

"It's not fun any more." There was a pause. Bernie scraped vigorously on a lead and then looked at his work, like he was doing something precise and considered. "I've gone after a grant and I'm setting up some consulting in the valley. I could use you."

"Don't kid around."

"It wouldn't be mainstream. Nothing to change the world."

"I'm depressed enough without being bored."

Bernie yanked a wire. "Damn, how many times have I told those fuckers not to solder this stuff down. It doesn't have to be boring, I'm talking about the pastoral life. I've been working my ass off for a long time now. And I like to work hard. But I'm beginning to feel like Stinson. Bushy brows and hemorrhoids. I even said "unlikely but possible" to one of my kids."

"Why don't we just join the circus or do mime?"

"My problem's always being bored. That's why I used to get in trouble."

"That applied stuff never really interested me, Bernie. And neither of us are going anywhere." I was pissed.

"There's all kinds of arts, Charlie. But what's the bottom line? Carol and I've got our bedroom in the attic."
We got a pool table up there. On weekends, after the kids go to bed, we just sit up there in our underwear drinking scotch and shooting pool. That's real life for me."

"So I'll tell Barnum that you and your underwear are on your way." I got up and went back to my office. I tried write a lecture for next day's seminar. Bernie was always stirring things up. I didn't need it.

After lunch I took a walk by the river. The day was cool and grey. Down by the shore the water seemed to be tipped toward the horizon.

Near the shore the water was a pale sparkling grey. There were a few leaves scattered on the surface. Fragments of broken concrete lay beneath. A short distance from the shore a timber stuck up. Here and there delicate white and blue flowers grew from fissures in the limestone that covered the banks.

The wind rustled in the trees. Far away I could hear the locomotives working and the crash of boxcars.

I walked by a dead tree with a tangle of vines growing on it. A white butterfly and a huge bumblebee with dusty wings skimmed the water. The city appeared distant and dreamlike as Oz. It was glowing as if it now belonged to a memory. A spider web hung between the roots of a tree. Brown glass bottles shattered along the bank echoed the river in the way they reflected light. A lonely man
with a bottle of wine sat starring out beneath a tree, throwing pebbles in the water. A little girl dragging a doll followed a large mongrel dog.

I walked toward the south hiking without a destination.

I stopped to rest on a log, covering my face with my hands, watching the patterns caused by pressure on my optic nerve.

I was sitting on an empty strand, where low bluffs hemmed in the narrow beach. The sky was barely distinguishable from the water at the horizon. The trees were colored with the soft grey green of new buds.

A little bit of wind came up on the water creating patterns of silver that shifted and merged. I thought of suicide. I knew it was time to head for the Heidelberg room. I would listen to the women talking. I would get drunk enough to be able to sleep.

***

I awoke next morning with a familiar feeling of disorientation. I had been living in the apartment for almost two years and it still felt strange.

Perhaps it was because the furniture was new and almost all of it formica covered. I hadn’t wanted to shop. The surfaces around me were indestructable. There was no possibility that anything would ever alter or adjust. The
paintings on the wall had been bought in the same place that the furniture came from.

The woman in the bed, still asleep had a short compact figure. Her youth and nakedness make me feel sad and a little humiliated. For a moment I couldn't recall how she got there. Barb. I had been very drunk. All of a sudden I had been explaining Cantor's diagonal method and how some infinities are larger than others. I was too drunk to drive.

I remembered then that I had enjoyed her.

But it seemed that in a night like that someone should have illusions. I felt like a tourist, taking a picture of a tourist, taking a picture of me. We were both on our way elsewhere.

And then I realized why I felt ashamed. I had taken the woman's part. I had wanted something more, knowing it was impossible. "It comes with age."

When she awoke I guided her to the cornflakes. She joked about sharing my toothbrush.

"See you tonight?" she said.

I hesitated. "I may have to work late."

"You don't have to worry about me."

"I don't mean that. It's just that we're in a difficult place right now."

"Of course." She downed her juice and pulled on her
coat.

"Thanks for taking care of me. I mean, for bringing me home."

"I don’t do this very often, I have a class at 9:00."

***

I often stayed up most of the night during that summer, driving the highways outside of the city, feeling like a star traveler, a spaceman. Speeding along through looping ribbons of highway lamps I was a steel ball in a pinball machine, among the bright lights, my radio blaring, seeing visions of Maureen, the curve of her belly, the nape of her neck. Then the city passed like a dream and I would go back to the country roads. Other cars with their red and white running lights would whisper past.

At about four in the morning I would head into town for breakfast. The wet pavement glistened as the street sweepers moved slowly down the streets, leaving trails behind like giant snails.

I ate at the Tic Toc Diner. At precisely five o’clock the silver Wonder Bread truck, carrying its load of great, amorphous, whooshing, white bread would speed by. Shortly after that I went home to bed.

***

I managed to survive on four hours of sleep. I took
pills occasionally but it wasn't a habit. The race with Quan was nearing the end. The project staff was in a state of hysteria and everything possible was going wrong.

The department had decided to do some remodeling and there were two major floods in our lab. We lost crucial experiments half a dozen times because of power failures. The computers were always down. For a couple of days while they were welding near the air shafts it smelled of smoke everywhere. It doesn't help your concentration to work in a building that seems to be on fire.

One evening as I was trying to get some data run Bernie invited me home to dinner. He wouldn't take no for an answer. "C'mon," he said, "Carol's expecting you."

I felt too tired to argue about it.

Bernie was married to a short plump woman who looked a little like she could have been his sister. She had a master's in social work and ran an adoption agency out of their home. They seemed to have collected one of each kind of kid, in addition to two of their own.

They lived in a large house, where each kid had a pet and each pet had to have a friend. There were ducks, cats, dogs, hamsters, roosters, turtles, parakeets, and a couple of ferrets.

When we arrived Carol announced that dinner would be late because one of the cats was having kittens. A bunch
of kids were gathered around a basket on the floor, whispering.

"C'mon," said Bernie. "I'll get you a drink. Unless you want to watch."

We pushed through a curtain of hanging plants into the library. There were toys and comic books all over the floor. The walls were lined with books and an odd collection of American and oriental bric-a-brac.

One of the children ran in squealing "Hi Daddy." Bernie scooped her up and twirled her around, lifting her up to the ceiling.

Carol came in, and took her away. She closed the French doors and said," I'll keep the kids out for a while."

"Thank's honey. See you later Muffin."

Bernie sank down in the Lazy Boy. He kicked off his loafers and nearly hit a box turtle who was under the footrest. The turtle jerked into his shell with a hiss. After a second it came out and nudged the shoe with his nose and walked away.

"Sorry, Homer," said Bernie.

He took a bottle and a couple of glasses out of a lamp table and got some ice out of a small fridge under the bookcase.

"You can have anything you want as long as its
"scotch."

He poured us each a slug and closed his eyes while he let it take hold.

"Christ, what a zoo over there. You were right in wanting to split the team and run the beta study again. Stinson never listens, just looks at you with those squinty eyes and charges ahead."

Carol came in with some cheese and won tons.

"Is there any dip left?"

"We ate it all last night. It won’t be long."

"The kittens healthy?"

"They’re arguing now on whether to keep only two or all of them."

Bernie rolled his eyes. "That’s always a bitch," he said as she was leaving the room. "One of the pups last year had an extra leg. They’ve got to learn about weirdness some time. But I don’t like it."

He stretched and wiggled his toes in his stocking feet. "Sometimes I think I married Mrs. Noah. If anyone had told me years ago that I’d be living this way I’d have said they’re crazy. So would my probation officer." He poured himself another drink.

"It’d drive me crazy."

"It’ll be a short trip. You’re about there."

"That’s not funny."
"Course it's not. That's why it is. - Have you thought about what I asked you?"

"C'mon Bernie, cut it out."

"Suit yourself. Here's my card."

It read "Dynatron" - "Chang and Lowell, Consultants"

"What the hell?"

"I figured I could always use them to even up the legs on restaurant tables if you didn't want to do it."

"You're serious."

"I have my moments. I'll tell you something about yourself hot shot. You're a lot more like me than you think. This pure science shit is wearing thin. I've watched you dragging in, popping little pills, staying late because you can't stand to go home."

"Group therapy begins."

The turtle had gotten itself wedged behind a cabinet and was scratching furiously to get out. Bernie went over, rescued it, and gave it a crumb of cheese."

"Let's face it pal, we're old. Hell, there're guys older than us playing linebacker. But for physics, we're old. It comes early or it doesn't."

He refilled both tumblers to the top. I could see that he had the wheels up and was reaching cruising speed.

"All the big guys did their best work before they're thirty. Einstein, Heisenberg, Dirac. You want to know why?
I figured it out. When you're 19, you walk around in the middle of the night with a hard-on, and it seems like you got to know things. You got to know because you're lonely."

"I'm not crazy any more. And Carol doesn't give a fortune cookie about K2005. I mean the women were always way ahead of us. You know, they do women's work, the stuff you got to do all over again. But our stuff just falls apart slower. It's all got to be done over."

"You wouldn't care if we made it?"

"At this stage it's not likely. But it's strange. Probably not. There'll always be someone else. That's the message, if you want to get hairy fairy. You know, I really think someone up there is laughing at us. He's rolling around on the floor of heaven with all his angels, and they got tears coming out of their eyes. I think they create the mesons on the spot every time we fire up the accelerator. They laugh and laugh like crazy as we sit down here scratching out heads."

"You're drunk, Bernie."

"From such a specimen that really hurts. Anyway, I don't think I really care about doing 'important' things. I'm ready to leave that to someone else. I want to enjoy, teach a few good students, kick back."

"Directly above us someone started to play Bette
Midler’s "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" full blast, making the cabinets rattle. It ended as abruptly as it began.

Bernie laughed. "The amazing thing," he said, "is that she almost never raises her voice. Things just happen."

He swirled his glass. They he passed his hand over his face.

"You care about the things that count, man. You really do. But timing is everything. Ask and ex 'jay dee.' You got to know when to get your ass out the door."

"I could never picture you out stealing cars."

"I was a tough little kid. I really was. But I guess I wasn't that tough. I think I told you about Father J. at the Boy's Home. The first day I got there I saw him lift a refrigerator on a truck single handed. I figured, you know, I had no future being a punk in a world with guys like that."

"Another success for social engineering."

"Yeah, just look. Let's have a toast Charlie. We paid our dues right? To youth gone by."

"To youth. Sometimes you even start to make sense."

Carol came through the door carrying a tray. "What's making sense?"

"Bernie. He's a philosopher."

"He's a con artist."

"Have I ever lied to you, honey?"
"Not when it counted. Now, let's eat."

We all ate out of the same pot while Carol talked about the Amerasian children and Bernie talked about his new idea for an efficient cage for small rodents.- Patentable."

When I left that night I promised Bernie I'd think about his proposition.

***

About a week later they were welding on the roof again. All morning long the whole building smelled of smoke and no one thought anything of it. When the fire was discovered it was out of control. I stood there watching in the summer sun. Wave after wave of heat came over me. I felt like a small boy with a hot, round face.

Stinson walked around, pale and uncomprehending, like someone who had been shot and was still on his feet through habit.

I watched the flames, fascinated and strangely unconcerned. Ten years of my life had been spent here. Four years of my work were burning. Yet I was watching like a bystander, hoping that everyone had gotten out.

A little later I saw Stinson being led away gently, like an old man or a child, by someone from the health service.

The flames danced on the roof and in a strange rhythm, like children playing a game, poked their heads in and out.
of window on the third floor. Then they put the ladders up and the hoses were on. The firemen rushed around with axes and hooks. It took them over an hour to get it under control. Finally there were just thin clouds of smoke rolling toward the mall.

I felt tired and my legs and back ached. I must have stood in the same spot for a couple of hours. I headed round the building to the parking lot. Toward the back of the lot I saw Bernie sitting on the roof of his station wagon with his feet on the hood. He was wearing a yellow baseball cap and playing his saxophone. I couldn’t hear the melody from across the lot.

When I walked over to him he looked down at me like a potentate or sage about to give an audience.

"How ya doin, Charlie?"

"Hell of a way to spend an afternoon. Other than that- Yourself?"

"Passable. Anyone hurt?"

"I overheard security talking to the fire chief. They think everyone got out."

"That’s great. I’ve been kind of worried. But talk about a blaze of glory. What a way to end your career."

"Stinson took it pretty bad."

"Stinson’s a shark. He’s got to keep moving or he’ll drown. It was a sign, Charlie. It’s three in the
afternoon. There’s still time enough to drink a little wine by the beach and play for the fishes."

"You’re crazy, Bernie."

"Suit yourself."

"I’m going to take a raincheck on the wine."

"You’re still coming over tonight? I want to go over that idea with you, and Carol’s counting on it. Her cousin from Taipei wants to go dancing."

"I’ll see."

"Don’t be such a lump. At least come over and look at the calculations."

"I’ll be there. I might be a little late."

***

I pulled out of the parking lot. The afternoon glittered sharply and the smell of dry grass and asphalt came through the window. I saw Bernie in the rearview mirror, still on the roof of his car, hunched over, playing. Only a single high note drifted by me. I blended into traffic, headed for the coast highway.

I drove down almost to the border. Then in late afternoon I turned around and headed back to the city. As the sun was setting, I found myself on a wide avenue divided by a grassy boulevard with palm trees planted in the center. I thought the drive would clear my head. Nothing came. I was tired of traffic. So I pulled over and
began walking down the center strip. The sun was going down. I walked for a couple blocks through a street of low houses. Children played in the small dusty yards.

A young couple strolled arm and arm down the sidewalk, toward the beech. He was wearing a white shirt and khaki pants. She wore a full skirt with a blue cotton blouse. The sky was soft gold.

I followed them, like a spy, feeling a little guilty. She walked somewhat splay footed. They held hands and swung their arms together. I thought of going up and asking them the time. I wanted to look in their faces, see if they were happy.

I had been driving along for hours, watching the coast landscape unravel. Now I had my feet on the ground, but it felt as if I were still driving. In front of my eyes was a flat screen. It looked like a world. I could walk to the corner and cross the street. I knew where to plant my feet. But all of a sudden I was wondering, what did things really look like?

They turned. She went up the walk to a Spanish style bungalow. He kissed her at the step and walked to a purple VW parked at the curb. When he left, I watched through the window, catching a glimpse of her reading.

I started to walk back to my car. I began thinking of Maureen and of how we used to walk hand in hand across
the campus at Cornell. We were both finishing our degrees. Sometimes we couldn’t meet for lunch for days at a time. But it didn’t matter then.

And then, I realized that I hadn’t been mourning her in the last year. That’s what I had thought, but it wasn’t true. I was mourning the fact that nothing had turned out like I planned. In a way I had left her, not the other way around. She had died, but I was feeling sorry for myself. It was too late to go back and say, "let’s start over."

After the accident I needed to prove that I had been right. That the project was more important than anything. But I didn’t want to be right. Quan would publish. Now that it had happened it was a relief.

I felt ashamed. I remembered the night I had given my first paper in New York. She couldn’t be with me. After I had given that paper I had stayed up all night, riding the Staten Island ferry back and forth, watching the lights of Manhattan recede and come nearer. Somehow that night felt intimate, it belonged to the two of us.

I continued to walk through the neighborhood, looking through windows at the warm orange interiors of houses as the night came on.

Oh, my love. I missed you.
Oh, To Live Forever!

The earth floated outside the window like a pale blue gumball that had lain in someone's pocket for a week. Harold Mendelbee wasn't impressed. "If only they had given the prize to that damn African. He actually wanted it.

He had tried to get away. But they'd found him right in the heart of the only remaining wilderness on the North American continent. He never knew how. They had descended one night out of nowhere on their wheellesses, yelling and whooping, "There he is! Head him off. Don't hurt him now!"

"God damn," one said. "I've never seen a poet before."

"A prizewinner, someone else said. "He's gonna live forever."

How did they pick the damn prizes? He'd always felt himself to be mediocre and therefore safe. There'd been a shortage of Americans, but who'd have thought they would give it to him? He wrote about trees, breakfast. And love.

"Lucky stiff," said the ranger, and not a bit grateful. See here Mendeldee, I just wasted a lot of time looking for you. You can come peaceful or tied up in a sack. I don't care."

So he went peacefully to accept the Nobel prize for literature. Down to Cape Kennedy and immortality. It was a crime to refuse. You couldn't even blow yourself up. They just went and put you back together.
The Nobel program was said to be a perfect embodiment of the ideals of sociolation. In contrast to the 20th century, modern people believed that one's first obligation was to the community. It annoyed Mendelbee that he had always agreed with this. It was like having a friend ask if you were a dog lover, and then present you with a wolfhound for your birthday.

It seemed that nearly everyone but Harold wanted to take the spaceship "Olympus" and travel near the speed of light, where the soma drug made your body processes balance perfectly. You never aged. Every three years for the space travelers (ten for those left behind) the docked back on earth. Everyone said relativity was a wonderful thing.

It was going to be a new age. Now not only the works of genius, but the geniuses themselves were to be preserved.

And what great new works, what infinite wisdom would be amassed by the Olympians, in their great elliptical college in the heavens. A quantum leap in human consciousness, nothing less, was expected. Harold could have puked and beat his head against the windows. But he knew he would have to be careful. If he didn’t watch out they’d send him to therapy and after that he might actually enjoy walking in holographic parks, smelling synthesized pine smells, wearing trousers that never
wrinkled and sleeping with amiable women who didn't have any fears or ideas whatsoever and called themselves physical therapists. He'd have to be careful.

***

The discovery of immortality had been controversial in the beginning. There had been the usual avalanche of articles promising terrifying consequences. The lawyers saw no end of problems with wills and lifetime guarantees. The evangelists proclaimed that this was the last and ultimate weapon of Satan. It wasn't lost on them that there was no point in preaching fire and brimstone to an audience that didn't expect to die. The economists were worried about pensions.

But the process was delicate, expensive and time consuming. And once begun, it could not be stopped. It appeared that a society made up entirely of immortals would spend one half its time monitoring the vital signs of the other. And the quantum processes involved in immortality seemed to work best near the speed of light. It was impossible to put everyone on a space ship. Thus the Nobel laureate seemed a logical group on which to confer this gift.

One problem came up immediately. It was only fair to make spouses immortal too. But some of the laureateS said
that if those were the conditions of immortality, they would rather decline. It was embarrassing to the committee when there was a spate of divorces just after the prizes were announced. The absolute low point was reached when Sonia Yarokovich shot down her husband Misha, just before he was to make his acceptance speech, screaming, "Now you'll live forever in hell!" Misha's dying words were, "You see how things were?" All of this took place on international television.

The international commission solved this problem by making it a crime to publish information on the lives of prizewinners.

Harold had no spouse. He lived with a woman ten years younger than himself in a cabin near the Hoh Valley in Washington. It rained most days, and on every inch of ground the entire cycle of life was in all its stages. The woman's name was Wren. Harold found that a little embarrassing. They were unmarried and had no children. She kept bees and made pottery for a living, spending most of her time outdoors, walking, camping, fishing. There was no question of her coming with him on the Olympus. He recalled the day he left she had been sittin on the porch, cleaning fish. He was not entirely happy that this would be his last memory.

"You can finish your river piece. You always say
there's no time. " she said.

Harold shrugged and shook her off. "Remember the kaolin deposit I told you about."

"I wish I could send you a cup. It'll make a nice glaze."

"I don't think there's going to be package service. Maybe a picture."

"I'm sorry, Harold, you know it would kill me."

"They won't let that happen," he said ironically.

"You know what I mean."

"It seems to me there's not as much enthusiasm for the thing. I read in the paper that some people are saying it costs too much. Maybe after a trip..."

"I hope I'm here."

"He kissed her, smearing blood and fish scales on his shirt. The sheriff had been trying not to mind them, while watching out of the corner of his eye. Harold trudged down the path into the county wheelless cruiser. Wren wave her fillet knife as they disappeared up the dusty road.

***

Harold looked out of the window before takeoff. The sky was milky with heat. The air smelled of plastic and metal. It was more a shadow of a smell than a smell. He felt small and childlike. There was a strange sense of peace in
being in the hands of a powerful entity. Though he didn't like machines much. They were like cats, quick, indifferent and unpredictable. Emotions were wasted on them.

He ate the crackers and drank the wine offered, while waiting for the countdown. They contained some kind of tranquilizer that made it easier to withstand the g force. Some people made a great show of refusing them. It seemed silly. The cabin attendant made one last round. She put her hand on his shoulder and assured him again that liftoff was really not painful and very safe.

Harold felt from the way that she spoke that she said those things often. He knew she believed them. She was deeply tanned and looked athletic. He wondered why she ever went into space service.

The rockets roared, the firmament exploded in his head when they fired. Harold's face was twisted back into a mummy's grin. He was sure that something was radically wrong. An hour later they were docking at Olympus.

***

Mendelbee's room was small. There didn't seem to be any edges anywhere. The ceiling curved into the walls, the walls to the floor, the walls wrapping around Harold in gentle curves. He had a nasty feeling that someone thought this was restful. In the narrow oval there was a bed along
one wall, a desk near the head. Along the other wall was a long curving counter, with a series of cupboards mimicking the curve of the counter below. "That will cloy," he said. He noticed again that there was a faint lime smell in the air. He knew in a matter of hours he wouldn't even notice it.

He settled into the ergonomic chair. It was supremely comfortable. That also frustrated him. They were doing things right and doing things wrong. And he would have none of either.

If only Wren had come. But she hadn't. There were plenty of women in space, he was assured. In fact it was encouraged that the immortals mate, if they were capable of it.

Outside his door there was a sound like a cat in heat. He wasn't sure whether he wanted to know what it was. He opened the door. There was no one. The hall was softly, lit, arcing off in an ellipse toward the commons areas on the right and the holorooms on the left (pick your walk: beech, forest or mountain).

Another door opened, a woman looked out. He had sat next her during the briefings. He seemed to remember that her name was Sondra and she was a biochemist. Harold shrugged at her, spreading his hands.

"Do you suppose we're haunted?"
"I don’t know," said Harold.

"How are your quarters?"

"I suppose the same as yours. Serviceable comes to mind."

"Have you been to the holorooms yet?"

"I’m afraid to be disappointed. What will I do if I hate them?"

"Want to check it out? The mountain walk is supposed to be neat."

"Why not."

***

Sondra was in her 50s. She was a widow. Her work had established a new family of structural plastics. She seemed to look on the Olympus as a lark. She relished finding out how everything worked, and within weeks had managed to alter the programing in the holographic parks at will so that they could picnic on mountain beaches, and stroll through desert rain forests.

One day they were trudging through the sea room, to picnic on the far side of a rocky Northwestern holo-beech. Sondra, preferred the sandy beaches of the East, but she was willing to go along with something closer to home for Harold. She had, however, provided a few surprises. They had barely started out when the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria came into view. Shortly thereafter, a large sailing
ship asked about white whales.

"It’s all so spooky. There’s a shimmer at the corner of your eye. It’s artificial and it’s real."

"Why look?"

"I want to know."

"You remind me of a hypochondriac. —’Am I bored yet?’"

"You scientists are disgustedly cheerful."

"You seem to be always worried that you’re going to be unhappy. It must be hard. I just say, here I am, I wonder what’s interesting?"

"There’s something off about everything here. The food, the smells. Even this. There’s you, me. Everyone’s paired off, just like that."

"You sure know how to talk to a girl on a picnic."

A pterodactyl swooped down on them, making a terrifying screeching sound.

Harold made a face and asked Sondra with his eyes, "What’s next?"

"I couldn’t sleep last night. I thought it might be fun to create some surprises to the outing. I won’t do it if it annoys you."

"I don’t mean to be a stick in the mud. It all just seems so strange. Not just the ships and the beasties. Everything. The green peas don’t taste like peas, the forest doesn’t really look like forest, but I’m forgetting
what the real thing is like."

"I was always taught, go for the possibilities. This is an interesting way to live. You’re more interesting than being alone. I like you. Maybe it’ll get better. Maybe it won’t."

"At least sex up here isn’t holographic."

"Actually I think they’ve worked that out for people with 'special needs.'"

Harold raised his eye brows. "Swell."

"I was tempted. But I’m kind of an old fashioned girl."

"What about next year, or 200 years from now?"

"That’s then. I’ll still be me. You’ll still be you."

"How do you know? After eternity, who knows?"

They had reached the picnic site. Sondra, reached into her pack and pulled out a blanket and began putting out utensils and containers."

"We had better set things out if we want a swim. We only have this till 2:00. - Look, if things are going too fast, or you want to look elsewhere, that’s fine."

"It’s not that."

"I like the fact that you’re complicated and quarrelsome. My first husband was like you. He taught literature. But this is where we are. I’m having fun. I might not tomorrow. But I’ll deal with that. We have snails, good bread in the hamper, a bottle of wine and the
After a month Harold had settled in. He had been through orientation, toured all the facilities: the library, the parks, the labs, the meditation and exercise rooms. He and Sondra were lovers.

At the orientation the sociotherapist had said: "You will live in an impoverished environment. While a great deal of effort has gone into concealing its limitations (we have done some ingenious work with mirrors and lighting), in a relatively short time you will become aware of many of our effects; if not their sources, at least the fact that they are an illusion. With that can come discontent, boredom and anger. In some cases sedation has been necessary."

"Olympus is beyond your intention or mine. It is here. You must live carefully. On earth we devour sensations like children. We consume without savoring, using far beyond actual needs."

"You can't do that on this ship. There are no purposes here, no destination. You are the only people who can set their own span of years. But there is a catch, as you all know, you must stay here."

Harold took the therapist's words to heart. He lived an
ordered life: so much poetry, reading, exercise. He observed the ship rule, one lover at a time. Not that he'd ever had an inclination for more. But there was something of an air of summer camp, that made the idea come to mind.

One night he came back to his room after a romp with Sondra in the anti-gravity room. He felt mindless and numb. On his desk was a bottle of carbonated water. There was nothing special about it. He had ordered it to make himself a wine seltzer before bed. All of a sudden he found the shape of the bottle offensive.

He knew he would see this bottle, thousands upon thousands of times. It was an adequate bottle. The fluted shape was not unpleasing. But he felt like a marathon runner condemned to run until death. This bottle night after night. Perhaps he could order another drink or none. But in time, given infinite time it was all the same. There was Sondra. A pleasant, intelligent woman, with a boyish figure. She was open, giving, had a sense of humor. He might love her. But he would be with her, or someone, and then perhaps her again, without end. If he stopped noticing, who he was with, or what he drank, the time would pass. But he wouldn't be a poet. If he noticed, then he would be worn away like a rock in a stream: the same subtle effect over and over until, he was translucent shell of mind, roaring some gibberish that might be every
poem and none.

Perhaps he could learn to love her, or someone. And perhaps love could string together all these endless moments. Perhaps like Schheherazade he would always have another tale.

He found himself breathing heavily, and laughed. The marathon race had begun. Perhaps he could take over the ship. Or when it finally became just too dismal, maybe he could find an airlock and blow himself into the void. It was going to be a waiting game. In the meantime, he'd always been meaning to read Proust. There seemed to be time.

All of a sudden a strange panic came over him. He felt cold. He was breathing heavily again. He flung his book across the counter and opened the door. He hesitated once in the hall. This was silly. To go back? No. He went next door, knocked, resolved to look at her like a drowning man. He would study every detail, from the roots of her hair to her crooked toes. He would take in everything. She would be his touchstone. He would try love first, and then Proust. It was as simple as that. Sondra opened the door. She seemed pleased that he was back so soon. She suggested a moonlight stroll on the beech. -She promised no polar bears this time.
CONFESSIONS OF AN ACADEMIC AMATEUR

The university was situated at a bend in the river. Approaching it over a hill, it was laid out before you all of a sudden on either side of the river valley. The two sides of the campus were connected by a bridge: a lower level carried automobile traffic, and the upper, a glassed in walkway.

It is difficult to recall many details of the first three years I spent there. I was absorbed in my work. Images and ideas flowed like a long waking dream. Away from my books I had no feeling for textures, only pattern. In fall I would feel as if stalked by small nervous leaves, shadows would jump out, be stopped, transfixed in my glance. In winter I enjoyed the pure, spare, musical outline of the trees, the restful curve of rock and grey water receding in the distance. In Spring I would feel pale and convalescent. There seemed to be an electricity in my body, an oscillation, as if after watching a long movie I had become both screen and lamp.

The campus seemed strange and exciting as a bazaar. Everything that had ever been thought appeared hour by hour according to published schedules. One could never tell what one might find upon opening a door, Nietzsche raving in an alley, Henry James having tea. At the sounding of the buzzer, Spinoza sat down in a seat left
warm by de Sade.

Little could surprise me. There used to be a man around campus who would bicycle to class wearing a gorilla suit. I hardly ever gave him a second glance.

It is an entirely peculiar way of life, day after day staring at a white page, letting thought seep through the pores of the eye. It is like making a long journey. There is a tendency to drowse and the recurring realization that one has no recollection of the last five minutes. And during those moments of inattention strange dreams and thoughts flit by. Anger, lust, form the cloisonne between the filagree of thought.

Study is an unnatural act. St. Augustine was amazed that St. Ambrose read silently. So many years ago, the corporeal word was beginning to vanish; both sound and texture fading. All that would be left was the directed fluid movement of the eyes, soundlessly calling up thought.

Reading, my stomach was compressed, my back crooked. In time I felt dwarfish and lame.

I preferred on even warm and sunny days, to move from place to place underground in the tunnel system. The fabric of images woven through study, the kinesthetic sense of the arguments spun by Kant, Spinoza, Plato, were soothing. I was enveloped in a feeling of self-importance
and gentle fatigue, which would be destroyed by the effort of walking through the mall, bounded by shrubs and wide grassy areas, among the crowds. The sky was too high, the expanse of people was too large.

I resented the variations of heat and cold, which the sun and breezes of a spring day brought. I was used to the sleepy warmth of the University buildings. I needed to feel enveloped, enclosed.

I had begun the University with a sense of adventure. I learned philosophy, art history, the theory of color, history, and poetry. I studied mathematics to limber my mind, though I only received the vague and temporary satisfaction of doing something difficult and healthful. I learned a little of the structure of bones and the form of language. I had no idea of how these things related to one another. I followed my interests, creating a confusion of facts and events, seeming to speak everything and nothing.

***

I saw myself as a kind of cosmic juggler, the balls springing up from the center of the palm with a minimal movement of the wrist and arms. There was a feeling in the center of my belly of perfect immobility. Like a juggler I kept all aloft, adding diverse elements piece by piece.

Study was like a glass cutters art, a work with gravers, files and acids. For three years I was absorbed
in the excitement of slow, painstaking, fine and steady work. I sat like a monk at his copying desk, through endless filagree blending together the fish, the serpent, the lion or demon. I sought to enclose the world in sentient web. A net in the sea of chance. I sat night after night in my small room, trying to write down the name of everything in the Universe.

I wanted to be a scholar more than anything. Scholarship seemed to make possible a continuity that life can never have. Everything repeats itself at unexpected intervals. Before this marvelous tapestry, life itself fades. Living is only an overture to the repeated themes. There is perhaps a feeling of not being quite human, of being more than human; as if in oneself one possessed the qualities of symmetry and order of the things one studies.

***

At the beginning of my fourth year I found myself becoming restless. And I was unable to explain why. I began to spend a great deal of time wandering around, neglecting things until the very last moment and the doing the absolutely necessary with resentment.

I discovered how difficult it is to ask the same question twice and more difficult still to know when the original question has been answered. You begin your
studies with questions about the nature of history, art, men. Imperceptibly, the questions change. Five years later you are teaching white mice to swim mazes in a laboratory and feeling wise as a judge. Somewhere your interests change. Somewhere, with an arched eyebrow, a whisper, a little encouragement.

My advisor smiled a superior smile on the first day I met him when I told him that I wanted to study philosophy because I had read Martin Buber. Four years later I had learned to wonder if it was possible to know that the sun would rise tomorrow or whether cabbages exist when you are not looking at them.

I discovered that the academic paper is a most peculiar genre. A certain dry wit is permissible. Footnoting of all points is required. Original thought is not an asset. The function that defines the form is to make sure that no one will find it easy to contradict you. An academic paper is more like a roof than a pillar. More a shield than a sword. Its function is to keep something out rather than to put something up. The less you put up, the less you need to keep out. It is somewhat the same principle that duelists observe when they turn their bodies ninety degrees to face an opponent.

I had taken a great deal of pleasure in performing this trick well. I learned to examine words, to look on every
one as an assassin.

But I began to feel a need to talk about life. There isn't a more elegant way to put it. I did not want to talk about my Oedipus complex or find hidden meaning in popular songs. But nonetheless, it began to seem to me that life is what study should be about. Whether it is two brakemen on the night freight talking over a bottle of port, or the meditations of Pascal, life is all there is to talk about. It is foolish, absurd, and insult to where we think our dignity lies. No one wants to confront the same emptiness, the same ache over and over and begin again like a child saying, "I think life is like a balloon, I think life is like cream cheese, I think life is like..."

I began my studies, filled with inchoate wonder. There were works that gave me feelings of delight, longing, disquiet. I wanted to touch them somehow. It was as awkward and sensual as discovering women. I wanted to know how to make love to the lady. I was taught how to worship the shoes.

***

A Faustean soliloquy (Faust addresses a mirror in his study)

Faust: "A man sets a clear marble of thought rolling through time. It rolls on forever. To think such thoughts, to create such thoughts, one never knows they are one's
own. Sometimes, often, one must send the question of one's own death rolling after them.

(He peers deeper into the mirror, taking the flesh of his cheeks in his hands, pulling it this way and that)

"If I were ever alone, freed from being my own audience, I might be sincere. My limbs would set upon each other like beasts.

(Striking a pose, as if addressing a class)

"If you desire a scholar's life, be prepared to lie like Adam every morning, with bones unhardened, waiting for the quickening touch that never comes. And the encase these bones without hardness, this mind without spark in learnedness. Plaster, it is all plaster, fine ground and discrete. And soft. Even the most agile among us can only walk on his hands.

"My mouth begins speaking, the words follow one another. I am the vessel, the crucible where many books have met.

(He stares intently into the mirror again)

"A midmorning performance, and not a bad one. But you are too old for your scruples, my friend. How long before you do yourself some harm? I must learn a more mediocre discontent.

***

In the spring of my senior year, nearing midquarters I
found the weather a perfect match for my mood. It was
dreary and cold. As I drove to school the radio catalogued
temperatures around the country. Brownsville was sunny and
80 degrees. What a difference a few hundred miles could
make. In 24 hours one could be sleeping on the sands of
the gulf. One could. I could. There were gas cards, money
in the bank. It was like an incident from the life of
Rimbaud. There were manifold literary precedents.

I told my friends of my scheme. They laughed. All talk
and no action. The dreamer. At 5 in the afternoon I was on
the road. A day later I was nearing Padre Island.

I checked into a cheap motel and headed for the beech.
The waves came in a steady pattern, always different
always the same. I had been traveling with one thought; to
be somewhere else.

I had declared myself, run up the Jolly Roger. I had
written to all my instructors, "Weather is fine. Wish you
were here." But looking out at the expanse of horizon, I
felt that what I had done was futile. The wind sighed like
a tired traveler on a highway, hurrying to another
destination. The bowl of the sky above and the variation
on a single theme below seemed to mock me. Sand and water,
repeated the same themes again and again.

I stayed on the shore watching the waves, walking
aimlessly up and down the strand. I had thought that a
freer, open space would unlock something. The vast scale
made me even more anxious. I was ashamed to go back. But
that seemed to be the only thing to do.

That Spring I had been scheduled to turn in an honors
thesis. There were still two weeks left in the quarter. So
I attempted to sum up what I had learned in the last
years. It was refused because it was original work. What
was required was an analysis of someone else’s work. The
quality could not even be discussed.

"That means if Plato returned from the dead and wrote a
dialogue, it could not be accepted."

"That’s right," said the thesis chair, not unkindly.

"You mean if Nietzsche was resurrected he could not get
an honors thesis at this university?"

"I’m not sure he would have wanted one."
That ended my academic career.

***

A postgraduate course in railroading for the Chicago
Northwestern was being offered that summer. It promised
$200 a week and all the abuse you could take.

It was there I began to learn something about the
world. For most of my formal education someone had been
standing in front of me and asking what seemed to be
obvious questions, which did not have obvious answers. I
had learned to look for the exception to the rule.
However, switching box cars is remarkably simple. There are no special cases. You throw the switch or derail. That is reassuring. I can recall conductors literally dancing up in down in anger as I would take an ill timed minute to consider whether the urgent order just given, might have an exception that I needed to take into account. "Throw the switch you son of a bitch. Throw it. For the love of Christ throw it." I learned that sometimes things are what they seem.

* * *

I continued to read on weekends, spending hours in the library much as before, when I was not out on the road. In time I discovered that the past I was trying to discover, the fabric I was trying to weave was an inward thing. The facts and who owned them were only a step toward the goal. Without a sense of wonder, of freedom and open spaces, without dreams study is benighted and without hope.

Libraries are wonderful places. On every hand are the fruits of the lives of the most remarkable men and women to have ever lived. You are free to choose any one. Today you can discover-Anything.

I feel favored in a library. The moment when Socrates stood transfixed on a summer evening and saw an idea take over his mind: that moment has not disappeared.

Yet most scholars come to this place like weary miners.
They squeeze their souls into some narrow vein of knowledge, stooped over, and work the seam till they are as narrow and cramped as their work.

It seems to me that man is the creature who forgets: like a bug on a table wandering aimlessly, seeming without purpose. Knowledge and scholarship are simply tools to remember those moments which seem truer of ourselves, more human. We can never be convinced. We can never know. The mind in isolation is a desert. The flesh makes it fruitful. We must, in the end not only know but act, using what we know to remember how to act best. In the end I decided that to do what I loved best, I needed to keep my amateur status. There was no place in the University that would allow me to talk about life, and to act in life. Or so it seemed.

***

There is something in my life that is entirely equivocal. On one side is despair. There is nothing I wish to do or see. I am a ventriloquist trying to teach the world, deaf, mute and indifferent, to sing. At times I sleep late in the morning because I am unwilling to face the futile passage of the day.

And yet I don’t feel this way always. Not even most of the time. In the afternoon sometimes a mist rolls in over the chain of lakes that punctuate the matrix of the
city. I walk around the lakes, through the parks, the curving grey-green boulevards; the water sparkles as if it has swallowed up the planets. I walk over the bridges of graceful stone, by fine old homes: the mansions of millers and brokers, the founders and patriarchs of the city, now long dead. There is something in the air which seems to offer hope of reconciliation of all the many separate dreams I have left scattered through the past. It seemed to be concealed just behind the mist, a block away.

Or in the morning, very early, the chill in the air creates cloudlets over the water. They rise over a clear, sand bottom lake. The water plants break the surface around the edge.

An insect comes to rest on a mother-of-pearl button on my shirt. A small yellow wasp. One can see his tiny feelers wave.

And I think to myself—this is a miracle. Tomorrow I shall stand on the roof tops, clear against the sky, and I shall praise the world, naked and laughing.
Spring Nights

On a spring night the smell of wet earth and gasoline comes through the window. Pale, geometrical, winter is leaving. I learn to use my senses again. I listen to the wind in the trees and it seems inexpressibly lonely. I saw it in all the faces today when I went out shopping. The reawakening seems to leave everyone except the very young a little unhappy with themselves.

The remaining snow hangs in folds like aged flesh, in dark corners. Perhaps elsewhere the onset of spring is clean and beautiful, but here it begins with mud, trash and black oil. All that was buried and forgotten in four frigid months resurfaces. -Winter is like philosophy. It denies the senses, muffling sound, covering smell, making touch painful; leaving only sight. It erases the past. During those cold, bright, silver-blue days it is so easy to feel wise. After a snow the world is so clear, and sharply formed.

But in spring everything is painful and confused. Shapes in snow, earth and water mimic one another and mingle indiscriminately as if to mock how memories carefully separated meet and assume patterns one would rather not know.

In winter the brain folds inward under the cold resting a quarter inch away from the surface of the skull,
giving a slight concussion: enough to keep both memory and desire locked away. The spring sun mercilessly lays everything bare. Sand and refuse lie everywhere; memories concealed, frozen in the brain folds are loosened up, floating before your eyes, and before they can be washed away, forgotten one has to observe and mark their presence.

***

The nights were warm. The smell of earth and grass, of new flowers drifted upward making the earth seem so much closer, and as if we were not so much walking on as through it. I felt it in myself, that every moment, the shaggy tree trunks in the darkness, and we, and how the branches whispered, their tips playing in the air overhead, which was music: and we were all the same event. He was shy and willing and seemed to need me. I held him for a moment. And it was not a matter of pleasure or pain. Everything was new to me. I felt the damp ground coming through my sweater and skirt and for a moment I was afraid. And then came pain. And my mind was blank and I forgot everything and looked up at how stark the branches were. It was all so terribly factual. And I held him for a long time afterwards; he did not seem to notice and I knew he was ashamed.

I didn’t want pleasure or excitement and it was no
small matter coming from the family I did. And yet how silly — his face red and fearful; his sweaty hands and face. I did not feel like I could be entirely myself anymore. I felt under my skirts a sickness. The sickness was to go back to the house. The porch light still on, the third step on the landing creaking, standing in the middle of the living room among the arm chairs and the lamps and magazines. Feeling this sickness. He said nothing, gripping me, his face turned away.

When he assured me again that he would still love me, I felt everything was lost. It was a need which we both had. But this was not love. I blame myself, my parents, everyone who educated me, but mostly myself, that I did not know it until it was too late.

For me, desire was an intoxication with all the world. For him, it was a slender hope always lost. I was Circe that night. I turned him into a beast, and he forgave me, if only I would promise to transform him again and again.

I have always felt my flesh to be translucent, myself, not an instrument. That night I felt sinful. I knew what it was to be naked like Eve. My flesh was opaque to him a temptation; I knew I had not enfolded him as I dreamed it would be. He had penetrated me. He had acted upon me and I lay apart watching the budding trees as he
acted.

I knew all this as he lay in my arms in his silence and regret. I knew it in the awkward way in which he tried to reassure me that he still thought as much of me - he would do the "honorable thing". But what of my honor? How could it be retrieved from his shame.

When I lost my virginity, that night a month before our marriage, I did not realize till then how completely I and my body could go their separate ways. That is the difference between a woman and a girl.

I thought I was still in love then. I thought that inexperience was to blame and time would bring us together.

Whenever I think of Spring I think of this. The falseness is not simply in love or a betrayal. It is as if we seem to want such different things from love and cannot know it until it is too late. When you love someone, there is something of yourself that you leave with them. It is partly an idea of the way things are supposed to be. No one wants to be unique, to have some strange, adventure that no one else has ever had. And if for some reason the love is wrong, there is no single road back to all of your past. Somehow it is hard as death.

I know it is foolish. But it is hard to forget. I don't think many people commit suicide over lost love. But
I have no confidence in love. With my child I feel as if I have delivered up everything and am empty.

At times I wish that he had actually been killed in the war. It is like a barbed hook I can't pull it out even knowing that everything sprang from a mistake.

When the letters come all I feel is fatigue. I feel like a sleepwalker going to the mailbox. It sometimes takes me a day to read a letter. At every paragraph I feel tired. I don't feel sad. I don't feel angry, though at times I know he is trying hard to hurt me. There is just a child sometimes sincere, sometimes cunning or tender: a child trying to discover a way home.

Shortly after we were married he left for Vietnam. We counted the days. When he returned, neither anticipated the changes I, through waiting didn't need him as much, he had become bitter. He could not tolerate the softness and placidity of civilian life. He hated the smiles, the looseness with which people held themselves.

I tried to be patient and understanding. But in the end I refused to be drawn into the anger, giving nothing of myself.

He learned to drink out there, and he continued to drink at home. It was difficult to conceal from my parents who were helping out. Finally, one evening he didn't come home. He called up a few days later and said he had
rejoined the army. Six months later he was thrown out and entered the first treatment center.

He is hateful. Like a man locked in a tower. He has a pharaoh's heart building a chamber in the desert. Joining the blocks with pins of iron. He is a watcher in a tomb feeling a barren wind, like the ghost of endless sand.

He wants to get back together. He has been through treatment. He knows what happened. He is sorry. "Dear Marie..." But it hasn't changed.

He won't bend. Something has happened and he won't let go. He killed, he tortured, he saw terrible things. He worries it from one side to another. He seems to be saying over and over again, 'Something happened.'

If he could say even once, "I saw the sun outside and it made me glad, I don't know why," I'd believe him. But he talks only about his "insights" and the books he has read. He doesn't tell me what he eats, where he walked, what made him laugh.

I know I'm being unfair. I'm not trying to find blame. Yet he seems to feel that he is the only one. He will not let go.

I no longer reply to the letters. In March I'll be in Phoenix.