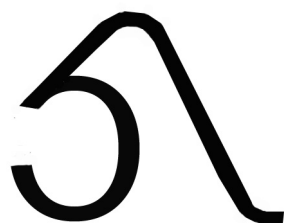


ANCESTORS

Charles Brownson

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ANCESTORS

People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors.

— Edmund Burke

There was an old crow
Sat upon a clod.
That's the end of my tale.
Now, that's odd.
— Nursery rhyme

Ancestors. If one proposes to speak of the beginnings of things, it would seem best to begin by introducing oneself. Ancestors, after all, require a spokesman. They have difficulty expressing themselves, often. Their meanings are obscure. Their very nature is difficult to understand: no one is himself an ancestor, and the evidence is thus all at second hand. Indeed, one's full ancestral qualities are realized only slowly, and are yet barely perceptible when one is mouldering, become long since imaginary. Ancestors are born in death, and are dependent for their very existence upon the imagination of creatures not yet born. Until then they are just folks, mere beginnings. Eve has not *yet* come into her own.

How ought one to introduce oneself? The French, with admirable but unjustified self-sufficiency, say *Je m'appelle...* I call myself. *Je m'appelle la France-roi*. Melville begins with the imperative: *Call me ...* — introducing thereby a hint of the *nom de plume*, of deception and concealment. No, we instinctively understand that we are called, even in the sense of divine nomination — that the matter is in others' hands.

To introduce oneself requires a name, I think. Yet we do not name ourselves, and thus when introducing ourselves by name we bring forward not so much ourselves as our denominators. We distinguish ourselves by our names, yet our names are made of common, undistinguished parts and are scarcely ours at all, being characters arbitrarily assigned to us by strangers at an age long before our characters are known. At a fundamental level we are simply not ourselves. From our cells outward we are symbiotic assemblies; we are colonies of diverse creatures; our mentalities are patched up from scraps of other minds; our very names are capriciously attached.

One's name need not be mentioned in an introduction, it is true. We have an old tradition of introducing one's ancestors or achievements instead of oneself. I don't believe I caught your name, you murmur over drinks, softly touching the skin in the hollow beneath my collarbone. I am the chief communications engineer of the field division of the Pacific sector of ITT, I reply. People like this are common in government circles.

We have a musty literary tradition of anonymous narrators which might be drawn upon, also. Who is the Stranger? Who is the motormouth at Finnegan's wake? Who is that, dithering underground? Who is that, impaled on the prickleball of the letter K? And who is that shy, comfortable trout fisherman of America, or that indulgent conductor of evenings with the orchestra? Who are you really, Amsel? Who is the shady persona behind whom Moses hides, attributing his work to some arrogant nobleman, fatuously believing his name will slay us should we hear it. And so also Abbott, deferring to a silly, mooning Square in a distant, botched world.

You see how far back I am obliged to go for my examples. The telling of tales is not much cultivated among us any longer. Oh, Jeremiah!

Most dignified, and certainly most considerate, is not to introduce oneself at all, but to get someone else to do it, or to simply mind one's own business. Allow me, then, to introduce Josephine Ailive Coudres, loosely speaking, who may be so called, when necessary.

The Coudres were Norman French, hazelnut farmers by their name, unless *coudre*, which also means to sew up or join together, was meant as a joke. There have been no tailors in the family, I believe, unless that fellow quoted by Thoreau who, being about to be hung, was asked for his last words, was a Coudre. Tell the tailor, he said, to remember to tie a knot in the end of his thread before he takes the first stitch. An astute man, for a Coudre — too much so, I think. Nor has there been any Coudre astute in business or philosophy, or indeed astute enough to sew up anything, whether it be underwear or arguments, though there have been several great lechers. No doubt the Coudres were Protestant, as they immigrated to Bristol at the time of the Huguenot persecutions. It would be typical of the Coudres, a factious house, to refuse to be joined together in any body, divine or politic, except it be lewd. No, they were hazelnutters, for sure. I am told there is an island in the St. Lawrence named by Jaques Cartier after the family tree.

I am called Josephine because of my grandfather's mistress. My brother was named Henry after the old man himself, but brother Henry, fortunately, was too dim-witted to understand what an indecent couple we made. This memorial was pushed through without any regard for my grandmother's feelings, but she herself was not innocent of nominal crimes. Her name was Frederike Meredith York Ivar Coudres, far too big a name for a small vernacular woman, so it was reduced to Rike, a German diminutive which ought to be pronounced reek-a, but in my family became Ricky. Grandmother had a son by a previous marriage named

Richard, also called Ricky, and a sister Hilary. Hilary was my father's name. This only scratches the surface. It is a wise child who knows her father, it is said, but wisdom, like stickiness, was never a family trait. Until I was middle-aged my relations were hazy at best, as obscurely related as a tale in which the characters trade names every few pages, or in which they are all named Ivan. What are we to make of Hilary, a wise child who was two persons with the same name? To what extent are they two? Suppose they shared a hand, or a heart between them? How to explain the disembodied feeling, the faintness when one meets another who is called identically? How are we to introduce them to each other?

My second name is my mother's. Ailive is Celt and means elf-darling. It was a name popular before the vowel shift: pronounce it as in lay-leave. The matter is a serious one. No mortal may be a darling of elves. And after so long I am tired of being *Alive* and all the silly remarks it provokes.

On the subject of introductions, it is natural to proceed from an inquiry into names to one into persons. Having a name, to what, if anything, does it attach? Can there be a name which names nothing? But perhaps we are not yet learned enough for this question. Let us put it aside for the time being to inquire instead into a simpler matter. If a question remains as to who I am, perhaps we can remove any doubts as to what this book is in which you find me.

I will efface myself, uncertain being, and speak instead of the furniture, the color of the walls, the Dürer woodcut newly hung in the sitting room. But here, what a thicket! Perhaps the piece is not by Dürer after all — how can we be sure? A forgery. It bears a certain resemblance to a Dürer —

Lord, am I to run begging for opinions on every hand? If I am not of my own doing, if I am so ignorant of myself, how much less can I know of some ink smudges on a piece of paper? But shall we find ourselves seeking advice on the rising sun, or the correctness of dreams? We must make an effort, lest we be accused of a want of courage.

What is this book, then? A history, on the ground that it deals with events past. But, in books, all is past, dead — how could it be otherwise?

On ground of the truthfulness of its account, then. Yes, but how am I to persuade you of the truth? Shall I concoct footnotes, refer you to some correspondence in the Ragusan archives? Journalism, perhaps — lesser ore of history. It is true that I kept a journal for several years, some of which will be found here in streaks and veins of various minerals, but there is little resemblance to the famous diaries of Pepys, for instance, Boswell, or Gide or Alviedo. There is a certain want of editing in such books. The more subtle and complex truths cannot be tasted in a dish that is served just as it comes from the can. Certainly there are some who live on roast and

potatoes, whose vegetables are all soft-boiled, who will object to epicurean truths. Well, you may get your nourishment how you will, or not, if you can find no food your stomach will keep down. This is not a cook-book, it seems.

Let us declare this a book of travels. But you should not expect to find much of daily events, or advice concerning the inns and what to put into your baggage, or reports on the quality of the waters. There are some notes made by the wayside — meditations on the scenery, and inquiries concerning the customs of the countries through which I passed — so that it is not all hard walking. And, as is so often the case, there were many nights when I was tired, and wrote nothing, so that it was necessary to go back or to leave that part of the country unexplored. And how often does one take a wrong turning, and marvel at a mere crack in the mud, mistaking it for the famous chasm that some travel half-way across the world to see? The route is arduous in places. I am sure you were not so foolish as to have expected a palanquin, to be born up the side of the mountain at your ease, as if you were of consequence.

No book of travels is complete without a map. As I could get none of my own journey, I have put in a map of something else.

Perhaps this is a book of philosophy, like the books of string figures that you puzzled over as a child. Do you remember the diagrams of cat's cradles you studied all one rainy afternoon? First the simple patterns, then the subtle variations. You struggled to remember them, and yet you knew that no amount of practice would acquire them all. The series is infinite, and for everyone there exists the pattern of which he lives in fear that one pattern which will leave him with a lot of knots on his hands and a foolish reputation.

Courage. This is not yet it.

J.A.C. Maro Reef
4 June 2110

Grandfather stared at her with characteristic arrogance, in the way that two-dimensional portraits have of following one with the eyes. Jo squeezed the photograph by the edges so that it buckled. Do that with a holograph and it would vanish. Grandfather only pushed out his jaw.

There were a lot of photographs, and boxes and boxes of paper. It must have been their mother's. Henry should have burnt it. But no, he had been struggling to put it in order — letters and photographs bore penciled notes in his small, upright hand; papers had been bundled and labeled. What for, in god's name? She was astonished at her brother's energy — he had thought he was duller. She had thought he would have been too addled for it. Yet he had even made a catalog, apparently. There were references to it on the packet labels, but it was lost. They had wanted a table for the flowers and had pushed everything onto the floor.

Here was a photograph, faded to pastel near-invisibility, of an adolescent girl dressed in a calf-length skirt and a coat with padded shoulders. On the back Henry had written *Jean Coudres b 1939*. Grandfather had had a bachelor sister Jean — no, that was ridiculous, Grandfather was born in the nineties.

She went rooting through the photographs for one of Josephine Arqué, Grandfather's mistress, for whom she and her brother had been named. There was none, but she found a strip of four tiny pictures on which Henry had noted *Josie Arqué ca. 2045*. It could not be the same person — his was a girl of twenty, dumpy in her depression clothes, with lank black hair. In the first frame she smiled tentatively. Her face was puffy, bloated. In the second frame the smile was gone, and in the third she had turned her head away. The fourth frame was a blur. Perhaps she had had to go to the bathroom.

1939? Five generations in that time. How many relatives does one have after five generations? Too goddamn many. She might know five in ten thousand, counting herself. The Americans had finally quit buming them, anyhow. Grandfather had been burnt, though. No chance of reassembling the sonofabitch.

She remembered, faintly, old-time funerals from her childhood — that was what came of growing up in a backwards place. But her mother's — and Henry's, now — had been like one of those midmorning assemblies of the brass that she had to sit through every week in Tokyo headquarters, all twelve of them in their precisely graduated armchairs to hear a vid report from some policy wiz. It was the practice of mucking the body that was at fault — *fft*, and the next day the assay came in the mail. You couldn't get someone to come in from the garden for that.

Stephen had called about her mother on a Saturday morning. In Virginia it was four in the afternoon and the old fellow had evidently been drinking since breakfast, waiting until it was time to call. But then Kobai had snatched the cover off the vid — Kobai's flat, impudent face sprang at the old man, only somewhat blocking a scene of interrupted intimacy, and Uncle had got the idea he had made a wrong connection, so that in the midst of saying that her mother was dead he colored, the screen went gray, and Jo had to spend a week's lunch money to return the call. Kobai would keep the vid by the bed. Well, why not? Who called but his friends? She carried it into her workroom to have a more discreet background, with a big computer-drawn flow chart pinned to the wall and the books on the drafting table.

Now that she was an administrative zit and went to vid meetings she had little opportunity to travel. She had always thought travel to be one of the benefits of her job when she was in the field, but troubleshooting was considered a hardship. There was even insurance against travel, it was so expensive. So when the news came that Henry had poisoned himself she took the opportunity to get out of Tokyo for a while. She wasn't surprised that her brother had managed to kill himself, with no one to look after him — he had no more sense than a camellia that comes out in January if you give it a warm smile. When she was little she had once tried to save the poor crazy things, and had picked them all. Well of course that didn't help a bit, but it was too late by then, and the perfume was so thick in her room that she choked on it. She had taped up the doors and windows and had a fine time rolling in the wilted petals.

So Henry, left to himself after their mother died, had gotten into the weed killer or something in the potting shed and it had seemed necessary for her to come and look after things for a while.

It was late summer and she was sitting out behind the house on an iron bench beside the stream that had long ago been trained to flow there. The water was clearer than she remembered, and there was not so much trash clogging the weir. But it was all overgrown and the pump shed rotted away, and the neighbors' out-buildings too were fallen on their sides, half sunk into the ground. She sat, drowsing. Her shirt was soaked through in patches and she pulled at the sweaty cloth, lifting it from her skin with sleep-heavy fingers. She had not been here for fifteen years. There had been a little new construction since then, visible from the air — two or three modern buildings with fashionable wind towers for cooling. But there was no wind. Uncle said the weather was improved — it was one of the benefits of a century of depression and the exorbitant cost of

fossil fuel. But the Southern summer was still a rank season — sticky, suffocating, as close as a body bag. And the long stretches of tumbledown buildings remained, covered with vines. Creepers choked the ditches and broken culverts, hung in ragged streamers from the trees, buried fences. The air was thick with the smell of fermenting sap and crushed leaves. And there was no wind and there never had been — there was no space for it to blow in.

Uncle Stephen Coudres came out from the house and crossed the back lawn. A thin, spry bachelor of seventy, he reminded Jo of a mantis as he sat beside her and folded his thick-knuckled hands quietly in his lap. His raddled cheeks, paper dry in the muggiest weather, hung in loose folds which quivered as he bobbed his head, a jerking little mannerism that served him in place of clearing his throat.

Stephen's head bobbed again. The silence lengthened out. Jo bent and scooped up a handful of stones to throw into the thick, muddy water.

But somehow a conversation was begun, of empty recollections. Jo impatiently pointed to the weeds, the decayed, house.

Yes, I'm afraid Henry was not very diligent after your mother's death.

What trifling. Letting her mind wander, she kept the conversation up with small noises and polite remarks.

These large houses are quite expensive to keep up, Josephine. They have all been little occupied. There is not enough family for them. Oh, Henry lived in two rooms after your mother died. No, not for a number of years — have lived by myself since your mother's death. Joseph has preferred to make other arrangements. Josephine, you must understand — Perhaps I haven't been as forthcoming as I might have been. Joseph feels that Henry might have, ah, taken his own life. If he had been better looked after — No, I think your brother Henry was a good deal more intelligent than anyone gave him credit for. Your mother may have realized, as she lived alone with the boy for so many years. Well, of course my closeness to her cousin was always a source of friction between us. She felt it was — improper. It was the cause of my leaving the house when your father died. She was left alone here after that. Joseph would know, of course. Oh, yes, anyone could have seen that. But Henry was so thick-witted. He was a very reticent person. Secretive, yes. It is difficult to be sure what he knew. Certainly he proved that he could manage the house and take care of himself. Oh, your mother was responsible for a great deal of the ruin, of course — But you must realize, it was Henry's will — Yes, to live in this manner. I believe he was wise enough to see what he gained by his mother's death. You ought to speak to Joseph. He knew Henry better than anyone. You ought, Josephine.

Did he? she thought. The two rooms in the corner, I suppose, with the French windows. And he spent long

hours in the night staring out over the lawn, his nose pressed to the glass. Why does Joseph think he needed looking after? Yes, and Grandfather looked after Joseph, didn't he? But I never went there. As a child I was kept in the dark, you know, and for fifteen years I've lived in Asia, as far away as possible. What Henry told me when he called was that my mother and father were never intimate after I was born. I learned that the month after she died. It was touching — he had never used a video-phone before. Those two, Mother and Henry, alone together so many years. They never went out. Divided the house between them, I suppose. Mother would have insisted he sit with her in the evenings. Poor Henry.

Stephen sighed and gazed into his lap, where he traced the lines of his right palm with the bent and blunted little finger of his other hand. His head jerked like a bird's. Jo left him and walked down to the stream. The thick uncut grass brushed around her bare legs, stems caught her bare toes, clouds of gnats rose up. The water in the stream was hot. She bent and splashed hot water on her thighs, calves, and arms, prickly with sweat and welted with hundreds of insect bites. Her feet sank into the ooze. On the bench above, Stephen continued to sit, slowly rubbing his lips with a knobby finger, as if he were putting salve on them. His scalp, beneath thin white hair like a frizz of mold, was the color of brick. Jo picked a piece of glass out of the water and flung it over the weir into the neighbors' weeds.

Stephen went back to the house. She watched him as he made his way on thin, arthritic legs up the long sloping lawn. Not a mantis — harvestman, maybe. Burrs covered his black trousers. He would wear black, even in the Summer.

Jo threw her whole handful of pebbles into the water at once. She was determined to finish what business was necessary and leave, quickly. Muckymuck the whole lot. Let the damned place rot after all. She would find some other way of getting out of Tokyo.

She splashed across the foul stream and pushed into the weeds and brush of the abandoned lot opposite, intending to lose herself until dark. But the undergrowth was too thick — it would not let her pass. Beyond the weir she turned to look back. It was rotting. Trees overhung the roof on every side and for years the dead leaves had been left to decay there. A long strip of gutter, choked with humus, dangled from the corner ell, its flue resting on the porch roof. The roof was covered with earth and appeared thatched — thick and rounded, edges indistinct, reaching ever lower for the ground — except that here and there patches of it had peeled off, exposing the shingles which curled up like shavings. She wondered if the attic were dry; the sagging catenary of the ridge line suggested it was not. Henry's boxes of papers were water damaged. Had they been stored in the attic, then? Why had she never been in the attic?

She looked down at the black water sliding over the weir. Bending, she cupped some of the water in her hand. It tasted of mud, chiefly, with a bitter chemical undertaste. She spit it out.

Since the underbrush was so tangled with creepers and thorny vines she walked instead in the stream, feeling with every step for glass and wire.

Among the bushes and vines on the opposite slope were some fetid, timorous-looking flowers. At one time she had known the names of these plants. They were all covered with a glutinous gray dust — there had been no rain for months, and still it was as sultry and stifling as if a shower had just passed. She remembered summer squalls — a splash of tepid water, tingly with the acid in it, followed by an explosion of steam from the hot pavement.

Thirty meters or so downstream from the weir a path came in. On the right it made a cleft in the waist-high brush which the creepers had already begun to close. On the left it was an indistinct track across the lawn. It led from the stream to the house, to the ell where Henry's rooms had been, and the French windows which had served him as a private escape.

She tried the path on the right but clouds of gnats and mosquitos blew up around her, driving her back. Sitting on the lawn, away from the insects, she used some leaves to wipe clots of mud from her feet and looked at the path that Henry had made going down from his room to the stream day after day. Her legs and arms, covered with bites and dried mud, began to itch unbearably and the stream water was too warm to help a second time. She gave up.

Later, wearing long pants and canvas shoes, she stood in Henry's doorway and looked out. Her face and arms were red with scrubbing and her wet hair was gathered at the back of her neck.

What did he go down there for? Kids — children make paths everywhere. Especially to water holes and abandoned buildings. Yes, it was her brother's track. It would be worth exploring. But now it was getting dark. She would do it tomorrow.

That night she picked through the heap of photographs again and found one from her father's childhood, a family portrait which she scrutinized for the influence of heredity. Josie Arqué, grandfather's half-witted oldest child, coquettishly peeping around her great-grandmother's skirts, resembled no one in particular. Those on the left, giggling, seemed to mock the right, all gloom, and in the center was Grandfather, bearded and boisterous, still in his working clothes, filling the photograph, stooping good-naturedly to keep his head within the frame. In each time-bleached face she saw her brother's lineaments, if she wished. In the journals and letters she read his character in every unrecounted incident, his mentality in every thought left obscure. That was Henry, wasn't it: not quite there. But Grandfa-

ther — his blood was thick, overpowering, visible everywhere, even in the puddingfaced, characterless Josie.

She went out to the morning room where Henry had put a memorial urn with a holograph of their mother. This she took out hopefully, but no — there was nothing of her blood in Henry, nothing to thin the old man's oppressive vitality or to offset the strain of weakness in it.

It was a recent image of their mother, which showed an older woman than Jo had ever seen. The fine lines of the skin, the little wrinkles, the sagging flesh, the faded eye — these had been hidden from Jo in her mother's Christmas vid calls. Videophone images do not have the definition of a holograph, would be the polite reason.

She dropped the image back into the urn. The clink made her wince. She turned out the light and sat in the dark, waiting. This was the morning room, after all. The sun would come here first, not to Henry's rooms on the other side of the house.

In the morning she would finish her business with Stephen and arrange to ship the papers back. In a week she herself would go, when she could get a flight.

Leave-taking. That was an act from an older time, when travel was common and one's leave was personal property, to be taken or left at will. Nowadays it was unconventional to abandon one's birthplace, as she had done. It was thought sufficient to travel in spirit, to send messages like fern spores, and one could not take leave any longer, but only accept it.

Her mother had sent those messages, which skittered about in the aether and sometimes found her. Your grandfather is ill — your grandfather is dead. Happy New Year.

Father dying. Come home.

Can't. Stuck in Perth. Best wishes.

The darkness made her restless. Back in Henry's room, standing at the windows with her face pressed to the glass, Jo stared at the track across the lawn, now picked out by dew, and wondered where Henry had been going so regularly to make it. It was like him to always go the same way, to make a path.

The next morning Stephen was to have helped her put Henry's papers in order for shipment back to Tokyo. He reached out for the tea which Jo had put on a small plastic table beside his chair, while she sat cross-legged on the floor, laying thin bundles into an open carton. They had been talking about the turn of the century, the stagnation of those years, the millennial feeling of hopelessness and doom.

We had talk of war, Stephen observed, almost forty years from the time was a boy. The poor nations are arming, they said, but no one knew what to expect then. There was no fuel to transport an army, and we were preoccupied with the depression at home.

Two bombs went off in that time.

Yes, the one in Buenos Aires — that was hand-carried, wasn't it. I've forgotten the name of the group responsible. And the one sent against Ankara. But there was never any feeling that would amount to much, you know. It was the uncertainty which told, the foreboding that came over one when messages failed to arrive, or there was no bread because of an inventory error, or one's bank records became so snarled that the only recourse was to abandon the account.

I don't remember.

You were quite young.

And Stephen reached for his tea.

Jo remembered little of her childhood. It was all one dappled, stifling summer afternoon to her, like a thousand flavors of ice cream all melted together. She was sitting in a doorway somewhere, her bare feet on the warm concrete step and her legs in the sun. Flies passed in and out. In the morning room, which was cooler, her mother played cards with two neighbors and their voices and the sounds of glassware were the only sounds indoors or out. After a while a breeze arose; a cloud put her feet momentarily in shadow; the heavy, dark green leaves of the plants by the door stirred and an odor of dust came to her. Then everything was still again.

They had had a little electric car during that time, that ran on hydrogen fuel cells. Henry could not be made to let it alone. It would have been simple, she understood now, for her father to immobilize it by keeping the fuel cells discharged. But he preferred to connive with Henry and so escape the problem of a driver's license. Henry, for his part, never let the cells run down and never went farther than Cannon Street. Jo, ten years old, had thought it was she who kept him from danger. She had had nightmares of someone being run over — it was her fault, she had not kept close watch. And Henry had always laughed all up Cannon Street and back, the bastard.

And always there was the threat of war. The voices of her mother's friends carried it, faint and distant, along with the clink of melting ice, blurred by the sus-surus of the fan. When she was older she learned the causes of these faint explosions and rumors, but when she was young it was like the heaviness of the air which came with rain.

When she was nine, Henry was shot in the stomach by a man fleeing from a bomb on Cannon Street a few blocks away. Some sticks of dynamite had gone off prematurely in a trash can outside a theater. She and Henry had been sitting on the veranda all afternoon. The bomb sounded as if something enormously heavy had been dropped on the lawn behind the house. There were distant sirens, and after a while a man burst from the trees at the end of the street and came running toward them. Henry had, perhaps, only wanted to find out what the trouble was, or whether anyone had been hurt. He ran off across the lawn to accost the fugitive. The

other man swerved, there was a small pop, and he ran on down the street. Henry fell to the grass like a bag of rice.

She remembered this clearly. It had rained, heavy drops with the appearance and sound of a pailful of glass beads thrown out in the sunshine. Then the street began to steam, curls of white vapor rising to the height of half a meter from the broken pavement, and in the sunken places the water lay like liquid metal. At the end of the street the fugitive darted out, running soundlessly, easily, his billowing smock-like shirt brilliant white against the dark green trees. He was running toward Henry. She saw his face — so round, mahogany, with round black eyes and curls of wet black hair. Then Henry stumbled and went down. He lay on the grass face down, his arms beneath him, and the other man ran on silently, smoothly, and was gone.

That was all.

Late in the evening, long after it was known that Henry would live, her father still sat in the big reading chair in the library staring at the toes of his shoes. She was huddled on the floor between the chair and the bookshelf. Her father's black shoes gleamed in the half-light and shadows of a single lamp. He sat with his legs outstretched, a small man, finely built, made even smaller by the large padded chair. He was always pale, even in the summer. Now his face seemed thinner than usual. His eyelids drooped. He might have been asleep.

Her mother came and stood in the doorway for a time. She wore a robe despite the acrid heat that persisted even at midnight, and sniffed the end of her sash as if it were a flower. At last she decided to keep vigil and sat on a side chair just inside the door, but she soon became restless. The skirt of her robe would not stay closed — she kept wrapping it over her crossed legs.

Josephine should have kept better watch, she said, leaning forward. But this provoked no response, and after a few moments more of silence she stood and went away.

More time passed in silence. Then her father woke with a start, shouting and shaking his finger at the empty chair by the door.

No! no! — he burst out, too late. It wasn't Josephine's fault. How could she have kept better watch? It was his fault — his pettiness, his complacency, his egotism is responsible for the existence of such people. He — you drive them to arm themselves —

He broke off. Jo was frozen with embarrassment — she had never heard her father, normally circumspect, say a word against her grandfather before this.

It's the blood weakness, he muttered.

Her leg cramped. She stirred. Her father looked up, startled, and leaned over the arm of the chair, having forgotten she was there. He smiled, but his thoughts wandered again and he sat back. Then after a time he went out, rubbing the side of his nose, and shut off the light, leaving her in the dark.

How odd, she thought now, going over and over the memory like a bit of pot-roast dug from between her teeth after dinner. She could not remember another time her father had shown a social conscience, or complained. Perhaps he had not said that after all. She had misremembered —

What was the truth here? At the least, surely, the truth was the rain, the heat, the terrorist's white shirt and brown face, the small pop in the soundless afternoon, her brother's fall.

She wondered what Henry and her mother could have talked about all those Years when they were together.

Henry's rooms formed a separate apartment. It would hardly have been necessary for him to go into the other parts of the house. It was quiet — a big house, never occupied by as many as six persons in forty years. It had always been quiet — a house almost empty, a neighborhood isolated and decayed, all overgrown. It was silence of a particular sort — smothered. He had listened for sounds which were never made, sounds which he expected to hear any moment. The house was filled with inaudible noises which were gone when he listened for them. The silence was haunted by creatures of the future — proleptics, subsequites — silent, unknown.

That winter had been cold, unusually so. It snowed once, for the first time in twenty years. For several days the brown snow patched the ground and at dusk swatches of fog appeared above the snow, materializing and thickening as the wet air cooled, clots of fog like smoke from microscopic factories working there at the foot of the big tree, along stone foundations and among bushes. But it was all gone by nightfall. The news was of little wars and the lack of this and that which had been lacking half a century already. In early April a cloud of gray dust blew up from somewhere and powdered the new leaves, until it rained. On April 13th, a Saturday, his mother complained of being short of breath and during the night she died.

On Sunday Henry did nothing. It had quit raining and he wanted to go down to the weir to see if the turbine in the old pump house could be restored. The rain had filled the pond behind the weir and flooded the pump house, so he found an old pair of chest waders to put on and for most of the afternoon he sat in the water looking at the old machinery and feeling about in the pond muck for prizes. The boots leaked and he got completely soaked, but he felt it would not be right just to sit down in the water without them. The weir gate should be opened a bit, he realized, to keep the pond from overflowing. That was what they used to do, but he liked it as it was.

In the evening he called his uncle Stephen for help and started a vigil, which he felt was the right thing. His mother still lay in her night clothes, untouched. He

watched from six until nine in the evening, when some people sent by his uncle came and removed the corpse.

The assay came a few days later. At the top of the printout was the autopsy result, which Henry could not understand very well, except for the familiar talk of impaired liver function and so on that was always on the printouts from the diagnostic center. He couldn't make out why she had died. Below the autopsy was a long list of the body organs and the names of chemicals and the amounts they were worth. In most cases the amounts were zero, and there was a note at the end explaining that this was due to decay. The total amount deposited to his account by the assay office was only twenty-five dollars and that had all been taken to pay the fine of two dollars an hour for not being quick enough to call the public health people. He folded the sheet up small and put it on a side table in the hall to give to his uncle.

Now Henry was dead too, and Uncle Stephen sat, cup and saucer on his lap, in the morning sun.

Joseph Arqué was there as well, Grandfather's get, discoursing earnestly on blood. He and Stephen had come to take away mementos and furnishings. It was Friday. On Saturday morning she was to fly to Honolulu, and then to Tokyo on Monday or Tuesday if a flight was scheduled.

Joseph was in the window seat. He leaned forward, hands gripping his knees. He was a short, muscular man in his mid-fifties, who wore a grizzled beard and affected the clothes and coarseness of a laborer, though he had never worked at anything, as far as she knew. Grandfather had supported him because he was got on the idiot Josie.

It was blood which was responsible, he was saying. Weak blood which bound them together, the old man's blood which had come out in Henry.

She giggled. Joseph broke off, pulling his head down in a prolonged shrug.

The two of them stayed on into the afternoon, strolling through all of the rooms of the old house, pointing, pausing to fondle some knick-knack or to wipe the dust from some piece of fine wood. They pried into drawers and cupboards, opened this closet and that, all the while recalling their kindred with a certain satisfaction, two old outcasts who had managed to outlast the rest and now found themselves heirs. It was a quiet pleasure, theirs — ages old, very deep.

After lunch she slipped away.

There was something she had promised herself and had almost forgotten — to find out where that path went that Henry had made into the woods.

The trail went over the back lawn, crossed the creek below the weir, and pushed into the underbrush. The path was overgrown already. Clouds of gnats rose up every time a stem was disturbed. Some creeper with needle-like thorns and fleshy noisome flowers was choking everything — its leaves covered the bushes like a dusty green drop cloth and loops of vine hung

from the overhead limbs to catch in her hair. The trail went up the rising ground beyond the creek. It did not simply lead across the back lots to the next street over, however, but bent away and followed the creek into the heavier woods which made culs-de-sac of most of the streets in the neighborhood. Here the heavier shade cast by the oaks and beeches kept down the underbrush somewhat, but there was no air movement. She was sweating, and her damp face and arms were coated with whitish dust from pushing through the bushes along the creek. The dust had a metallic taste, like the creek water, which it had probably contaminated.

Jo shivered and froze, as if she had found an insect crawling on her, or sensed someone lurking nearby.

Day after day, all summer long, Henry had come this way and had gotten this poisonous dust on him. It was heavy and sticky — light summer rain would never wash it off the bushes in a protected spot. But if there had been an industrial accident? No — Henry never paid any attention to the news. But people died of environmental poisons every day — it should have been a routine diagnosis. Yes, routine if he had been a child, or an old man whose body was corroded by a lifetime's accumulation of dirt and whatnot — provided the concentration was high enough to draw attention to itself. But one looked for slow death here. One did not expect to find a healthy, middle-aged man felled unless he had been out in it day after day and what fool was going to be out hiking in the woods, for god's sake? Under the circumstances the bioassay computer would have printed out suicide, and unless someone happened to look over the routine autopsy — But no one had, obviously. And suicide was such a routine, acceptable cause of death.

No one had thought of murder, either, apparently. But then murder was the unlikeliest possibility of all.

She tore off the tail of her shirt and used that rag to wipe off her face and arms. The stuff looked like flour. Perhaps she was wrong?

The trail pushed through the woods, which were more extensive than she remembered. It was hard to tell how far she had been — perhaps a kilometer.

Then abruptly the woods ended and the path led through the weeds of a vacant lot and around the end of a boarded-up warehouse, where it vanished. Here a rail siding ran along a gray row of empty warehouses and loading docks.

A block away, up a short street of broken pavement heaved up in jagged chunks, was a thoroughfare. She walked up that way. It was Cannon Street.

The street had changed in fifteen years — it had gone completely to hell. Across from where she had entered was part of a row of scruffy shops, with gaps of rubble where buildings had fallen in. Some of the buildings still standing were vacant, burned out; the rest had been mostly boarded over and turned into dives — bars, nightclubs, theaters — with here and there a storefront

church or a pawnshop. Directly opposite was a grocery. She crossed over. A few crates of brown fruit stood on the unshaded sidewalk and behind the grimy window were half-empty shelves of cans and bottles and miscellaneous hardware. An old man slept behind the counter, leaning back in his chair against a magazine rack. Beside the grocery was a second-hand store, its lightless interior crowded with a jumble of clothes, canoe paddles, pots, and junk. In the window was a display of guns.

There were very few people on the street in the mid-afternoon heat — women on this corner, one on that, and a derelict asleep in a shaded doorway. The buzzing of flies sounded in the empty air. The pavement was stained and patched in layer upon layer like ancient stones with lichen — the marks of urine, vomit, shit, crushed insects, thousands upon thousands of broken bottles, blood and the putrefying carcasses of dogs and cats, chemical rains.

In both directions the long street was the same — Cannon Street was a wide, empty avenue through a vast slum which here and there bordered on an enclave, her own neighborhood, encysted and invisible in the trees. Beyond Cannon Street lived a great many people, seemingly unheard of.

This was where Henry had come every day.

Jo turned off into a back street, passing into that world as if through a wall. The streets, originally designed for vehicular traffic, had been nearly built over with ramshackle houses, interweaving like the fibers of scar tissue which suture a cut. The buildings overhead, leaning against each other, closed off the sky. The narrowed street became a tunnel which was further choked with shacks made of scrap plastic and other junk recycled a dozen times, so that sometimes the street was filled up entirely. People crawled and scrambled through the junk to the holes within, like weasels.

Here were crowds. As she penetrated further into this region the noise, the smells, the suffocating heat increased steadily. She kept to the most open streets to avoid losing her way. In the center of the slum she was carried along by swirling throngs amongst baggage-men and people burdened with every imaginable sort of goods, beggars, solicitors — the slower-moving were washed up against the walls of the buildings where others stood watching the mêlée or sat dozing wherever they could, while still others hung from the windows above, windows from which scraps, bits of garbage, and water fell on the moving mass below. Jo began to resist the flow, slowed, struck deep through the congestion, numbed by the noise and heat. For hours she walked, was carried by the crowd, walked again as it thinned, and emerged at last on another thoroughfare — Beach Boulevard.

It was exactly like Cannon Street — ruined and empty. And beyond it lay more of the same.

By now it was twilight. The sun was going down at the end of Beach Boulevard and the sky blossomed in billows of purple and orange. Suddenly the air, the pavement, the buildings, all burst into orange light as from some stunning, unimaginable explosion. And as

Henry might have done — he *had* done when he ran across the lawn to meet the fleeing terrorist — she went running down the boulevard toward the exploding sun, waving her arms.

Wait! Wait!

THE FLUKE

I

Henry Nome had been in the mountains for a week. He was driven to go there every so often, the way people are driven to visit their relatives, but he was always glad to come home again, home to his books and his plants.

Footsore, shoelaces flapping, scrambled pack hanging from his shoulder by one strap, Henry Nome scuffed up the stairs and along the second floor hall, fumbling all the while in his pocket for the keys to his apartment. They weren't there. But how could they not be — hadn't he just locked his car up in the parking lot with them? Cursing with impatience, he let his pack down and began to dump out his pockets onto the top of it.

The hallway smelled. There was the usual dingy, peeling-wallpaper smell, but also something else, damp and thick. Another of his neighbor's bean concoctions? No, here was Major Kelter himself, complaining that the sewer had backed up in Henry Nome's apartment three days ago. He, the Major, would have called up the manager, only the manager was gone to Maine and the rental agency would not reply to recorded messages.

How do you know it's the sewer?

Doesn't it smell like the sewer to you?

Damned if it's the sewer. I'll suffocate if I can't get a shower.

Henry had found his keys now, and unlocked the door. But unlocked, the door still would not open. He rattled it angrily.

Here, what's going on? My door's locked on the inside.

Curious, the Major stepped across the hall to see. A second time Henry unlocked the door, but with the deadbolt and the latch drawn back the door rattled against the inside lock. Henry had put this third lock on himself. It closed with a key from the inside only and was supposed to be impregnable.

How am I going to get in?

What did you leave it locked that way for?

How the hell could I leave it locked that way?

Major Kelter rubbed his chin. There must be someone inside, he suggested.

Did you see anyone go inside?

No.

In a fury, Nome leaped at the door and landed a solid kick with the heel of his boot just above the keyhole. The door flew open. Nome landed on his back in the hallway. Lying on the hard carpet, his feet on the threshold, he raised his head to look into the black open doorway at the once familiar objects which now loomed in the mysterious inner darkness.

It did stink. Had he forgotten to take out the garbage?

The Major retreated to his own doorway to look on. Henry got up from the floor and went inside and the Major held his nose as inside, the lights went on in one room after another. Then there was a gasp, a moment of silence, and at last some loud cursing. Nome reappeared in the hallway, his face blanched.

There's a dead body, he said, choking. Call somebody. It must have been dead at least a week.

He started to say more but the words were muffled. He cupped his hand over his mouth and ran for the fire escape at the end of the hall. The Major went into his own apartment to call the police. Henry returned shortly, wiping his mouth with a crusty, wadded blue bandanna.

They coming?

Yes.

Nome turned, irresolute, squeezing the bandanna in his hand, but turned quickly back.

Look, he said, you don't mind if I wait in here, do you? I'll just stand by the door.

The Major nodded, but asked Henry to at least close his own door. Nome went out, but he did not cross the hall directly; he angled across and approached along the wall like a cat. With the door shut the smell was reduced somewhat. Nome returned carrying his backpack.

You don't mind if I bring this in here, do you? I don't want it to get ripped off. I'll just stand it here, by the door.

The Major nodded again. Nome shifted from foot to foot, pained by blisters, ill at ease. There was a long silence.

It's a woman, Nome said.

There's always a woman responsible, replied the Major.

No, I mean it's a woman's body.

What's it doing there?

It's dead.

That is, how did it get into your apartment?

How the hell should I know? After they got in, how did they get out again? The windows are locked.

Who?

The murderer.

How do you know it was a murder?

Well, I looked. It's there on my bed, the guts are all out — where am I going to sleep, for god's sake? I can't sleep on that! It smells! I'll have to throw out my mattress, won't I? You can't wash out something like that.

Nome glanced out into the hall, but his apartment door remained closed.

He said nothing more for several minutes.

They said they were coming?

Yes, the Major answered. They did say.

How soon?

How soon? Oh — well, they don't say so many minutes, you know —

Nome shifted his feet, looked at the ceiling, at the floor, and back out into the hall.

Would you like some coffee? offered the Major, backing into the kitchen.

Have you got any Scotch?

The Major, startled, reappeared in the kitchen doorway. Scotch? he muttered. Yes, of course, Scotch would be better.

I gotta whiz, too.

Eh?

Can I use your bathroom? Nome repeated, embarrassed. The Major simply indicated with his hand.

It was two hours before the police arrived, two hours largely of silence.

Nome sat on the floor drinking warm Scotch from a coffee mug. After a while his back started to ache and the Major, seeing his discomfort, offered him the leather television chair. Nome eyed the chair. His shoes were crusted with dirt. His feet were blistered; he wanted to take off his shoes and socks, but didn't dare. So he avoided the chair. Neither spoke for a long while, until the Major began to reminisce on the deaths of soldiers. They had been neither heroic nor cowardly, and the Major had been impressed by the plainness of their dying. Nome was disgusted by this military coldness, until he reflected that the Major had seen a good deal of death and probably intended his speech as a courtesy, in fact. He might think the ability to judge death a sign of humanity, and think it a courtesy to interpret this par-

ticular death as commonplace, mundane, muting his neighbor's horror.

At last someone did come. A gray sedan pulled up in front of the building and soon afterward someone was heard walking slowly up the hall. It was just one man in a rumpled gray two-button suit who tapped carefully on the open door of the Major's apartment. The others, he said, would be along shortly and in the meantime, what were the circumstances here?

Nome said only that he had gone to the mountains for a week and that when he returned there was a dead, rotten body in his bed. The Major added some details about the smell and that no one had gone in or out of the apartment for a week. The detective nodded, pursed his lips, and wrote down also the details of Nome's trip — the trails he had used, the rangers he had spoken to. And the Major was, of course, at home the whole time with his ear to the door? Well, no. The detective nodded again and crossed the hall to look at the corpse. They could hear him opening the windows.

You've had it for a bit, haven't you, to judge by the smell, the detective said when he returned. You don't know who it is, I suppose?

No.

There's a cast on her leg. How did she break her leg?

I've never seen the woman before.

It looks like someone kicked the door open. How did that happen?

I did that. It was locked on the inside.

How would it get locked on the inside?

By someone who was there, inside, I guess.

Do you have any idea how a woman with a broken leg could have crawled into a second story window?

Maybe they brought her in by the door.

Maybe she came in by the door and went out by the window.

The windows were locked.

Maybe they had a key, then.

Why would they come here, unless they knew the place?

How the hell should I know? Maybe they got the address wrong. Maybe they picked me out of the phone book.

Uh huh.

The detective made a few notes with a very thin silver pen which he then put away in the recesses of his suit. He looked at his watch. Well, he said, the others will be along shortly. I won't keep you. Tell them I stopped by, will you? Lieutenant Malkin.

Yes.

Malkin.

Yes, Malkin.

The others did come along shortly but it was still very late when the body was finally removed. The officer in charge was named Mommick, and he wanted to

know whether the windows had been opened. Nome mentioned the earlier visit of Lieutenant Malkin.

Malkin? was the puzzled reply. Don't know him. All right, thanks.

The corpse was gone. Nome returned to his apartment, exhausted and angry, with a can of aerosol deodorant Major Kelter had given him. He got rid of the mattress by throwing it into the airshaft, emptied the can of deodorant into the air, and then laid out his sleeping bag and foam pad on the livingroom floor. He left the windows open and undressed in the dark, too tired to shower. But, tired as he was, he couldn't sleep.

The business didn't have to smell so, he thought. Damned butchers. They had to yank all the innards out, spill them, throw them around like children unpacking a Christmas present. Certainly the body didn't have to putrefy so quickly. What about all those dead babies one reads about, kept wrapped in newspapers and tucked under the bed for weeks?

And that fellow in Doyle's cardboard box mystery — he'd had the decency to put the dead man's ears in salt before he mailed them off.

Henry Nome shivered and retreated further into his sleeping bag. The inside of the bag smelled like dirty toes. That is the way they always smell, even new — the genius of sleeping bags is a humble one, fragile, a spirit of damp and airless, but protected, places.

II

Lieutenant Mommick did not reach his desk until almost eleven o'clock the next morning. There was a type-written note taped to the seat of his chair. Mommick rubbed the water from his eyes and peeled the note off his chair. It stuck to his finger.

Woman answering your description, it said, was victim of automobile accident ten days ago. Now a patient at French Hospital. Ciel Duffy, room 321.

Mommick blinked slowly, trying to clear his bleared eyes. He reread the note taped to his outstretched finger and sat down with his coat on.

Idiots, he muttered.

Lieutenant Mommick waited, holding the note. After a few minutes a thin man wearing a gray suit approached carrying a file folder under his arm. Mommick put out his hand, the note lying on his palm.

What's this? he demanded.

The detective laughed. They had been checking the hospitals, he said, looking for this woman who'd had a cast put on, and here was this Ciel Duffy who fit the description exactly, cast and all.

This is a joke then, Mommick growled.

You should have seen the head nurse. She turned as white as her uniform when I told her we had a woman answering Duffy's description down at the morgue.

Did you see her?

What? See her? No — what for? The duty nurse said they'd just taken away her breakfast.

The detective started to explain what it was he had thought funny, but Mommick brushed him off.

Did she have any visitors? Mommick wanted to know.

I didn't ask. The whole thing was only a coincidence.

Have they got any identification on the dead woman yet? Right here. I just picked it up.

The detective handed Mommick the folder he had been carrying. Mommick opened it, blinked slowly.

You read this? he asked, and pulled the telephone to him by the cord. A stack of papers slid off the desk and floated across the floor. Mommick dialed three numbers while he was looking through the telephone book. Finding the rest of the number, he dialed it and waited, holding the telephone clamped to his ear with one shoulder while he rummaged through his desk for a pen. He spoke briefly, waited, spoke again, and hung up without yet finding something to write with. The identification folder had fallen to the floor along with the other papers and the detective, who had picked it up, was reading the forms inside.

I'll be damned, he said. They've got the dead woman listed as Ciel Duffy.

Ciel Duffy has vanished, Mommick said. Woman at the hospital seemed to think you had something to do with it.

Me!

Tall, thin man in a gray suit was asking about her this morning. That reminds me — do you know a Lieutenant Malkin?

No. Who is he?

Never heard of him. Find out if we've got a Lieutenant Malkin, will you?

And find out what the hell's going on in that hospital.

The detective moved off. Mommick, still wearing his coat, rolled his chair back over the papers lying on the floor and put his feet up on his desk.

In a few minutes the detective was back to report there was no Lieutenant Malkin.

Dammit. All right, get a description of him from this Henry Nome — he works at the public library. And talk to that Major Kelter again, that lives across the hall. Then see if they know at the hospital who this Malkin person is.

The detective left. Mommick sighed and applied himself to straightening and repairing the papers which earlier he had so majestically disregarded.

They did not know at the hospital who Lieutenant Malkin of the Spectral Police might be. Nor did they have any explanation for how Ciel Duffy, dead since Sunday last, could nevertheless have spent the week in the hospital under medical observation for internal injuries received in an automobile accident. But slowly an

explanation emerged. There was an orderly, it seemed, who had been on duty the night Ciel Duffy was admitted. At least, his time card had been punched, but no one could remember having seen him during the night. The janitor, however, claimed to know the orderly had spent the night with him in the basement, on the nod.

Come on, Mommick complained. The janitor couldn't have been down there all night?

That's just it, the detective replied.

Steals his dope out of the dispensary, this orderly?

Looks that way. We've got that much on him.

So you're telling me that this guy has it worked out so that in order to make his alibi he has to confess to robbing the dispensary. Well maybe he didn't think of it that way. Anyhow, as it happens, this orderly lives right across the gangway from the apartment where the Duffy woman was found. You can look in from the kitchen window, and walk across on the fire escape.

So he gets Duffy out of the hospital, takes her home, and leaves the body in the apartment across the way. Then who's this in the hospital all week?

We don't know. But suppose he gets a friend to take Duffy's place. She stays in bed a few days, then checks out and goes home. What are we going to think? That it's a coincidence — two women with the same name. We could have been a helluva long time straightening that one out.

We still could be, Mommick grumbled. All right, check it out.

The detective left. Mommick sighed, stood up to take off his coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and sat down again at his desk.

Idiot, he muttered, taking some forms from his desk drawer.

III

Henry Nome was going about as Neil Duffy, brother of the deceased, from Salt Lake City. He went to the hospital to pick up his sister's clothes, found she hadn't left any, and heard a complicated story which the police had uncovered concerning one of the hospital orderlies. Then he went to Ciel's apartment with a key obtained from the rental agency. Here he found he had anticipated the police who, having already caught the murderer, had not yet conceived an interest in the victim. He talked with Ciel's neighbors, trying to appear solemn and fraternal.

It seemed that Ciel Duffy had had a lover who was very much like her brother Neil — in fact, the resemblance was uncanny. Well, this fellow had come around Sunday last and Ciel had gone off with him and not come back since.

She's dead, her brother repeated sullenly. So I heard. Automobile accident, wasn't it?

He nodded, his words half strangled with gloom, and said that she had gone to the hospital and been killed.

Them doctors —

You misunderstand. She was murdered.

What? In the hospital?

There, or later. Her body was taken away and left in an apartment, an empty apartment nearby.

Taken away? What for?

Well, to hide it, I suppose. You know, to save it for later.

Omigod.

It was altogether an effective performance, but he was disgusted to find, as he repeated it for each neighbor, that the illegitimate emotion was becoming less a sham, that the proper anger of a stranger dragged by accident into an unpleasant business had become, for the time, the anger, and the pity touched with fear, of a real brother.

Henry Nome, alone, walked through the dead woman's apartment and slowly turned over her belongings. Ownerless now, they seemed unattached and useless, as if they might stick wherever he put them, or float like the pencils and wads of chewing gum one sees drifting about the insides of spaceships. He found a couple of things he thought he'd lost — his fountain pen, a paring knife he thought had fallen into the garbage, a shirt he thought he'd left at the laundromat. He looked at these things with melancholy, but they were no longer his and he put them back as he had found them. After a while he went to stand by the window.

Idly he watched the people passing in and out of the Italian market across the street. This lover of hers is certainly not a person above suspicion, he thought. He lives in my apartment when I am not there, takes away my things to her place, and brings back her corpse for me.

Next to the market was the entrance to an apartment building. A woman who, moments before, had put her car away in the garage now re-emerged from the darkness, locked the garage doors, and went into the building. A few moments more and she appeared in the bay which mirrored Ciel's where now Nome stood. Behind glass, separated by the street, their eyes met. A chance meeting, without consequences perhaps. Nome stepped back from the window into the interior darkness, withdrawing from her sight.

This intruder would have had to have a key — how had he gotten it? Major Kelter would know his comings and goings. And what of the dead woman's counterpart, the woman in the hospital who was gone now too, like a reflection slow to leave a mirror.

He glanced around the dead woman's apartment again. She had left it in a hurry, as if she expected to come back soon, but where was she going? The sofa-bed was open, the bedclothes rumpled. Socks and underwear lay in a heap in a corner, one sock of a pair

here and the other hanging out of the bureau drawer. Across the back of a chair lay a pair of soiled jeans, one leg ripped to the knee. Dirty dishes stood in the kitchen sink, the old dishwasher long since run out and the sink rimmed with spaghetti sauce.

He was suddenly uncomfortable, as if he had stayed too long, with the feeling that someone was coming, that he would be discovered. This feeling came over him sometimes in the mountains and upset all his plans, forcing him to hike out to the nearest road immediately, heedless. It was true that the police must come here eventually. He could not afford to be found by the police.

As hastily as he could without drawing attention to himself, Henry Nome locked up Ciel Duffy's apartment.

At home again he searched carefully, looking for some small sign of the person who had taken away his fountain pen, his paring knife, and his shirt. He went over each room systematically, turning up the rug, studying the dust and the positions of objects, turning out the contents of drawers and closets piece by piece, peering into cracks and recesses with a flashlight. In the bedroom, under the old high-legged bureau, he found a small square of white paper. One edge of it was gummed, as if it had been taken from a pad of scratch paper. It was folded once, and was blank.

He went out to the livingroom and held the paper up to the light from the window. There were no marks on it at all, no impressions. For most of an hour he sat in the overstuffed chair near the window, ruminating, tapping the folded paper against his thumbnail. At last he reached for a pencil from the pot which sat on the bookshelf nearby and, with a record case for a writing surface, quickly wrote on the blank paper the call numbers of a radio operator whose transmission, picked up on Nome's stereo amplifier no matter what he did to prevent it, had been annoying him for some time: KLU 4862.

Then he stood up and went out.

IV

Lieutenant Mommick looked askance at the piece of paper which lay on his desk. It had been lying there since yesterday when Henry Nome brought it in, saying that he had found it while cleaning his apartment. Now Mommick had committed himself and would be embarrassed if the note proved to be some stupid cryptogram, or the call numbers of a library book, or a gibeing reference to clue number 4862. But apparently it was not. The FCC had located a CB operator in the vicinity with these call numbers, Mommick had a description of him, and he had committed his staff to a long, dull session of monitoring the man's transmission.

KLU 4862 was not the criminal, of course, for why should a man write down his own call numbers? But Mommick assumed that the man who had made the

note was the man they wanted, and if they monitored KLU 4862 they might find out something about him. There was little enough else to go on — the case against the orderly had collapsed. They had been around to the Duffy woman's apartment twice and had learned nothing which did not complicate matters. The detective reported that he had been preceded by a man who said he was Duffy's brother but certainly was not, as Duffy had no brothers. Then a woman across the street the said that she had seen Duffy's lover prowling about, apparently in the tracks of the false brother. To cap this, it seemed the elusive Lieutenant Malkin had been there as well — at least when Mommick went around this morning he was told of the inquiries of a skeletal detective in a rumpled gray suit who wrote with a thin silver pen. It could be Mommick's own man, of course, but how could he be sure? There seemed to be two of everything, as if a second, ghostly crime lay under the first, and Mommick himself were reflected in it by his shadowy counterpart.

For a week they listened to the disembodied voice of KLU 4862, the voice of a personality which existed only within the electronics of a radio, an arrogant and brutal voice created by the radio itself, by the anonymity which it permitted and the ephemerality it imposed. For a week they listened, wearied by the dog work necessary to identify everyone in this phantom radio world, wearied by the attention required, by the ever-present fear that they did not understand anything of what they heard, that it was all only the coded, specious talk of still more shadow worlds beyond, receding to obscurity, to a world of copper and ceramic and invisible electrical transactions beyond their knowledge or power to understand.

They listened for a week. At last the randomly created conjunctions of radio brought them one of the men they had waited for, or at least his voice, which they captured in his stead. It was the elusive Lieutenant Malkin.

Malkin, it so happened, was a camp follower, a voyeur who lived in his automobile listening to the police radio traffic, always on the move from one crime to the next, a bystander at every suicide, fatal accident, armed robbery, and murder. He was a witness to crimes, to the detritus of unexpected death, but he was not the criminal that Mommick sought. Malkin was a distorted reflection of the police themselves, and from him came the solution for which they had vainly searched.

One of Malkin's regular radio contacts had mentioned a newspaper article on the Duffy slaying.

Malkin's contemptuous reply crackled in the speaker: Are they still working on that? Hell, I had that one figured out before I left the place.

Everyone in the office gathered around the radio, their attention fixed on the disembodied voice which issued from it.

Three weeks ago Sunday night, the voice went on, I get a call about an assault and drive over to have a look. The cops are late, of course, and by the time they get there the action is gone. But I see this woman with a cast on her leg being helped away — this guy has his arm around her, and half his coat. I guess now he wasn't helping too much because a week later I go to check out this body that's turned up — well, it's the same woman, all cut to pieces, and what's more the guy that was taking her off is there staring me in the face. Turns out he's a retired military guy, lives across the hall. Well, then the cops go and get the body mixed up somehow with this Duffy woman and the next thing you know they're out in left field.

At this point Malkin was forced to break; the brittle, mocking voice disappeared and Mommick heard no more. Someone stopped the tape recorder. There was a long, embarrassed silence. All right, Mommick said at last. Check it out. When the detectives had gone Mommick threw his pencil across the room.

Idiots.

V

Henry Nome had delivered the note supposedly found in his apartment to the police. He wondered, as he left the police station, whether the police were cautious enough to have him watched. But the early morning street was empty. At the end of the block he turned onto the avenue and walked down to catch a bus. There were no men sitting in cars parked at the curb; the traffic passed smoothly and did not return; no one stepped onto the sidewalk behind him or emerged from a vestibule ahead or got onto the bus with him.

He transferred to a second bus, one that took him past Duffy's apartment.

Yes, there they were, two men in gray suits and rumpled hats standing in the window of the Italian market picking out eggplants, watching. Nome got off the bus two blocks farther on and walked back.

Blithely, he stepped into the vestibule of Duffy's building. His back to the street, he peered into the last mailbox in the line and found it empty, then let himself in with the key which the rental agency had given him earlier. As he turned up the hall stairs he glanced back briefly — bleared by the thick glass of the street door, revealed momentarily through a break in the traffic, the two detectives still stood in the market window, obviously arguing about how to tell the sex of an eggplant. Nome smiled.

Would Duffy have put the safety chain on? Or had she not returned yet?

If not, he would come back again. He would keep watch until he found her home, and if she locked the door against him he would break it down. He had no intention of letting her escape. Indeed, he was already sunk as deeply into her as an anchor rusting on the

ocean bottom, as the point of a harpoon into a fish, as deeply and tenaciously as an intestinal worm.

The chain was not on. Henry threw open the door and stepped inside.

Ciel Duffy was sitting on the sofa-bed, her broken leg in its cast stretched out on top of the bedclothes. She had been reading, but the book had fallen from her fingers.

Neither one moved or spoke for a very long time. Then Duffy closed her book and put it aside. Nome shut the door quietly behind him and put on the chain.

You've been telling people I was dead, Ciel Duffy said. Yes.

It was not true — she was not dead. But she would be dead soon enough.

Should she die an old woman it would be far too soon. Perhaps Henry Nome would be the cause. There were so many ways for him to become a killer — an automobile accident, an infectious disease, a pregnancy, passion, madness. Having met, might they not accidentally separate?

Perhaps she would refuse him. Perhaps it would be only a chance meeting, without consequences.

But why should he heed such matters, or fear them? Like the barbs of an arrow, they will not hinder the shaft which sinks into its target, though they may prevent its being drawn out again.

Why did you run out of the hospital? he asked.

I couldn't stand it. There was no privacy. There were examinations, day after day —

Where did you go?

My parents have a cabin. I went up there.

Yes, to the mountains, where Henry himself was driven to go so often. In the mountains is the thing hidden, unknown. The mountains are fog-suffocated, vistaless — unlike the clear light and limpid distances of the desert which will hide nothing material. The desert has its own mysticism, one of illumination. The spirit of the mountains is dark — primitive, sudden, dread, randomness.

THE APPARITION

How does one come into being? Slyly, shyly, carried on a cusp of time, water on the curl of a wave. Droplets blow from the crest; the wave is dashed into spray on the rocks. A mist of blood drifts inland. Rich, fertile drops lie gleaming, spherical mirrors in the foot-worn hollows of the pale brown stone.

An orderly mops the floor, dissolves the blood, leaves the stone wet and clean.

Shyly, slyly, I lived in the world's imagination like a crumb in bread, a bean in soup, long before now. How does one come into being? Slowly, in the minds of generation upon generation. Now, in wondering over this primal question, I recreate them all — imagine them as they me, and wonder why. It is a child's question. Only a child can ask it, never answered all life long, unanswerable, a mystery.

Ancestors are tales which I draw around myself like a thick coat, giving myself weight and body. I am one in the tales read out loud by my mother, outdoors on a summer afternoon — one of those beings solid and yet insubstantial as smoke among the bushes and blades of grass, rustling in the trees and under the peony bush like the breeze, everywhere and nowhere like a crumb in bread, interpenetrating the real. Air is enskined in a loaf of dense fresh bread, its crust thick, powdery with flour — it steams when broken hot, and inside a soft moist web of pale gray dough, enskined with air as the mind is with the past. I am a peasant soup, barely liquid, brown with meat juice and marrow and slowly fried onions, each spoonful bringing from deep within a few beans, still whole, their delicate skins split.

But no — perhaps some ill-considered act begot me. If so, it were only one of ten thousand, no more consequential than a hair in the bread. Pick it out. I am an accident, a fantastic sport through and through, no more than the pattern of ocean spray, the arrangement of beans on the bottom of the stewpot. A chance. Tell the future by me if you can. If this had not — if not that — But one must begin somewhere.

It was all Hugh Sabotier's fault, Jo decided. He was the cause of it.

Or perhaps the thunderstorm?

The storm had come in off the lake and was rattling the glass in the balcony door of Georges Arqué's apartment. Georges stood gazing out moodily, blinking as each squall of wind lashed the building with raindrops like glass bbs. Occasionally he sipped from the beer can which he had pulled by habit out of the refrigerator but the beer, two hours old, was now flat and no longer cold. He wasn't thirsty, anyway. There had been no work at the new Mississauga job because of the rain, so he had chewed up a few hours putting kitchen cabinets

into the house on Islington Avenue, so as not to waste the drive out, and then came home. Since then he had been watching it rain. Now, as the storm moved on, a pall of dingy clouds was settling down behind it, trapping gloomy pockets of mist in the street, suffocating the failing light. In the room behind him the television screen glowed greenly with a weather map of eastern Ontario. It had been raining for hours as far away as Kingston and northern New York was now socked in. He had planned to go to the mountains for the weekend. That was out.

Georges turned off the television and set his can of beer down on top.

He was hungry. But because he had intended to be gone he had done no shopping, and there was nothing to eat. He lowered himself slowly into one of his ancient, dusty chairs. The apartment sank into gloom. On the chair's padded arms his fingers traced the pattern, faded to invisibility but still tactile, its fleurs-de-lis slick against a sandpaper background. The beer can on the television glimmered a moment longer and then its light, too, died.

He went to the kitchen after a while, vaguely opened this cabinet and that without ever turning on the light. For a while he lay crosswise on the bed, feet flat on the floor. Then he returned to the armchair in the livingroom.

The telephone rang. He stretched and tipped the receiver off the bookshelf but couldn't catch it and the handset bounced on the floor, bleating. He snagged the wire and pulled it in hand over hand.

Georges? Yes.

I thought you weren't there.

Who were you going to talk to, then? The hearth spirit? I thought you went to the mountains.

Too wet.

I'll come over, since you're there. Georges? Yes. Bring a pizza. I haven't anything to eat. Beer?

No. Nothing.

Is there something wrong?

No, I don't think so. There's nothing to eat. I was trying to decide whether to go out.

Are you going out, then?

Out? No, I thought you were coming over. I'll ask Hugh.

Yes, ask Hugh, please. Hugh, am I going over to see Georges? What about Ian?

For god's sake, call Ian. Just get over here with that damn pizza, will you? I'm starving. My strength is ebbing away.

Don't get shirty. Are you sure you're all right? Never felt better.

Evan, dubious, hung up tentatively. Georges let the receiver fall beside the chair but after a moment the dial tone roused him. He turned on the lights and began a few desultory preparations.

It's the weather, he muttered. The low pressure. Wet. Damps the vital

fires. Volatile essences escape. Pfft.

What godawful weather, Ian remarked. You've met Gail, haven't you? Oh, I think ...

Isn't Hugh coming? Ian stretched out his long neck to peer over the tiny room, as if Hugh might be among the crowd of old furniture.

You're earlier than —

Well, we expected the traffic to be heavier. Gail's brought the beer.

Gail? You look gruesome, Georges. There hasn't been a beam fall on you again, has there? Gail, the beer is still in the car, I think.

Ian wore a camel coat covered with a tatter of straps and belt-ends, which he stuffed into the seat of a chair.

Here it is June, and I'd put away my coats. What lashing weather. You really do look bad, Georges. What dissolute practice have you discovered?

Georges had rescued Ian's coat and was looking into the closet for a hanger. I haven't been eating, he mumbled.

No eating? Good god. You ought ... is that Hugh?

Georges pulled the door open with his free hand. It was Evan, up to his eyes with three boxes of pizza, and behind him Gail and another woman, each with two six-packs of Molson. Evan sidled in.

Here, hold this while — you know Maureen, I think. The traffic on Bathurst, I think they've got cold. Ian ...

We can heat them ...

Just put the beer there, why don't you, and let Georges find room. Georges says he's not eating. He's on a fast or something.

What? George — Evan turned to him, aggrieved. Georges stood in the closet holding the coat and the pizzas, two strings of beer hanging from his fingers.

No, said Georges dully. I haven't been fasting at all.

Hugh burst in then. A bulky, vociferous man, he wore an enormous scarf which he began to unwind from his neck amid shouted greetings, pausing again and again to laugh and pound someone on the shoulder.

By god, he roared at last, rubbing his great hands. I believe there's going to be no summer at all, eh? Georges, what a load. Give me this, here — Georges is a walking corpse.

Pfauh! He looks sound enough to me. Did you look over that new Mississauga tract of ours? A mess, isn't it.

There was no work. I put up some cabinets ...

You should give up that dandified bank work of yours, Ian. Get some air. Your chest is a mere reed, you're blue —

Find out where Georges keeps his plates, will you, Maureen? Here, give me one of those before you go off with them.

Are they cold?

Gail, where — Yes, cold.

We could put them in the oven, I suppose ...

The evening did not turn out well. Hugh jumped off the balcony about nine o'clock and fell three stories. He was badly smashed, but not killed. Georges was the only one to see it.

Hugh's jumped off the balcony, he pointed out from the depths of his chair.

He simply opened the balcony door and stepped out, Georges explained later. No one noticed. He might have been going to the bathroom.

Ian fiddled with the buckles on his coat. Only he had come away with something adequate to wear. The rest were huddled in a knot in the deserted hospital hallway. Georges was wearing Hugh's scarf.

One is not immediately impressed with the significance of what is happening, Ian began.

Just like that. Pfft.

What for, is what I want to know, a querulous Evan had been repeating. Maybe he got the doors mixed up.

Maureen's eyes had been rubbed black. It's so shocking, she murmured. You don't notice right away. My sister knows a guy had both legs cut off in an accident? He didn't notice until he tried to step out of the car. It's like when you forget to unfasten your seat belt, and, um...

It's the weather. Depression is — One gets depressed.

What I want to know is, what for? And I was the one who invited him, wasn't I? I feel wretched.

Depressed, my butt.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall.

Jesus, Gail, have mercy.

Oh, I'm sorry, that wasn't quite the right thing, was it? Damn, I'm cold.

He can't work now, Georges mused, taking another turn in the scarf around his neck. He should've jumped off a taller building, the dumb sonofabitch.

At dawn Georges was still awake, sitting deep in a chair in his apartment, covered with a blanket.

In front of him on top of the television there was now a row of beer cans like the pipes of an organ, and the sun shone momentarily through the dawn crack between the clouds and the earth, a single beam which touched the pipes with guilt. Then it died, and a leaden air replaced it.

Georges got to his feet, still wrapped in the blanket. There would still be time to go to the mountains.

Rain would have quieted the back country. If he started now he could reach the Adirondacks by two o'clock, enough time to hike in along the Moose River, perhaps. The Iroquois were in uprising there. The country would be deserted. State police mooched up and

down Highway 28, loitered in Eagle Bay, and a permanent camp had been set up on the dirt road going north to Big Moose. On the porches of cabins along the road Indians sat, leaning back with folded arms and expressionless faces. The low scud of clouds, the rifle racks, the shotguns standing muzzles up gave them an air of surliness, tinged the unnatural quiet with fear.

Georges stopped at the police shelter, a polyethylene and lath hut heated by a cast-iron stove. There was a map table in the middle of the floor with a topographic map under wrinkled plastic. The trooper, in Levis and a down vest, nodded laconically as Georges laid his thick, blunt Canuck finger on this and that spot on the map. Three rifles leaned against the table.

I wouldn't recommend it, the trooper said.

The back country was deserted, but not empty: it was full of the ghosts of dispossessed people. New fence, new signs, old bullet holes, blow-downs uncleared, trail markers gone. He walked up a creek bed and over a low ridge to Chub Lake, where he camped, wet and exhausted. He felt as jumbled as his backpack — turned inside out, all the lint and sawdust, stray nails, tape rule and hand tools scattered. U.S. Customs had torn up his pack when they saw the Benzedrine on the dashboard. At dawn a beaver began playing in the lake, slapping the water and jerking him awake with the sound of gunshots.

He had planned to recuperate at a disused cabin which he knew of on another creek to the north. But here was a man living. When Georges emerged from the trees behind the cabin the other man was taking a bath in the creek.

They were both wary, Georges dirty and stubbled and hunched, and the other man, smaller, ash-white naked, his round spectacles dropletted. Ordinarily Georges would have nodded and passed on with a word or two. But he had come to this particular place on purpose. Now here was this man with his little tube of concentrated soap. Georges stopped a short distance upstream, near the crossing. He gazed up toward the rapids, squinting in the drizzle.

Been here long?

Three weeks, the other replied. Came up as soon as the bugs were gone. He hunkered down in the icy water.

Going to stay long? All summer.

Georges sucked his teeth. After a moment's thought he leaned his pack against a tree and with a tin cup dipped some water from the creek. He studied the specks floating in it.

Had any trouble? he inquired.

There was no reply. Georges looked up. The other man was gone. Georges drank the water, reflecting. Then he cut himself a piece of salami, which he slowly chewed up. Sucking on a lemon drop, he carried his pack up to the cabin and set it on the porch, out of the rain. From it he took stove, fuel, pots, water, and sev-

eral small plastic bags of dried food. The squatter reappeared. While Georges was bent over the stove fumbling with a book of matches the squatter looked on, leaning in the open doorway, arms folded, smiling faintly. He was dressed now. Boots, gray wool socks, natural wool sweater, lederhosen — everything regulation. Georges clomped irritably up and down over the loose boards of the porch.

Come here often? The squatter's voice, raised above the roar of the stove, was thin and reedy.

I used to.

How far are you going?

Hiking out tonight.

You live around here, I take it?

Toronto.

The squatter lifted his eyebrows slightly. The water was boiling.

Georges emptied the plastic bags into it, stirred, and put the cover back on. A moment later he turned the stove off. As always, the silence that followed made him wince.

Sorry to be in your way, the squatter said pleasantly.

Georges glared but then, suddenly self-conscious and feeling boorish, he peered into his soup.

Friend of mine jumped off my balcony, he mumbled by way of apology.

Hurt himself? the squatter asked blandly, not at all taken aback.

Pretty much.

What was the trouble?

Don't know.

Recently?

Yesterday. No, day before yesterday.

The stew was ready. Georges poured some into his tin cup, blew on it, and began to eat. A faint whistling began — he squatter ducked inside and returned a moment later with a blue enamel coffee pot, steam rising from the spout.

Only got one cup, he said, producing it.

Georges wiped his own cup out with his finger, poured coffee, and set the cup on the floor to cool while he finished the stew directly from the pot. The squatter poured for himself and sipped noisily, steam fogging his glasses. At last Georges rubbed his chin and reluctantly held out the stewpot, but the squatter waved it away. While he ate, Georges gazed at the other man with mild interest — seemingly antipathetic: so well outfitted, so calm, dry as an etching. Whereas Georges: sodden, turbid, wearing three old check shirts one on top of another —

Henry Nome was the squatter's name. They shook hands — hesitantly, hands poised a moment in mid-air, fingers curved as if about to snare a fly, then darting forward rashly. The conversation advanced in a similar fashion. Rain continued to fall. The rest of the afternoon passed slowly.

How can you afford to live out here all summer?

Unemployed, Nome replied.

Georges nodded, reluctant to pry any deeper.

When did you come here before, then, Nome asked some time later, so cautiously that it was almost not a question.

Ten years ago, maybe. Used to leave Friday night and come back Monday morning, go to work without any sleep. Can't do that any more. You get tired, You make mistakes. Cut off a finger or something.

Can't get any time off?

Work stacks up. Too much work in the summer.

Ever do any winter camping?

Sometimes.

Don't like it?

Not much. Cabinet shop keeps me pretty busy.

Work pretty hard, don't you?

Pretty hard. Money's good.

Why don't you take some time off?

You got to keep busy, eh?

Maybe so. Family?

Georges ignored the question. I bought some of those gold bars a couple of years ago, he said. Put em in a safety deposit box. Little specks, the size of your thumbnail. Breeze come up and they're gone.

Good money, you said. Is that what you do with it?

Pretty much. Some land.

Well, I don't need such a lot, Georges muttered a bit later. You don't want to just throw it away.

There was a long silence. At last Nome got up to make another pot of coffee. Georges examined the sky, repacked his stove, went behind the cabin to relieve himself, washed his pot and spoon in the water dripping from the eaves, examined the sky again. After two days he was drenched. He felt soaked to the bones. And it was quiet — smothered silence.

Nome brought the coffee out again. Sitting, Georges shivered and heaved himself forward, resting his forearms on his knees, hunched. He picked at a splinter, a fuzz of weathered wood in the board by his foot, scrooching slowly down.

This land I bought, he began. A woman I know told me about it. She grew up there.

Where?

Nova Scotia.

So it gradually came out, reluctantly — halting, then darting forward rashly, retreating again. How did he spend his time? Work. After work. Some friends — well, really just the ones. They'd all been in school together. Overtime. A woman he saw some of. Some cabinet work on the side. The money was good.

There are obligations. The mortgage payments.

No. Bought it cash. Twenty acres — an old mine town. Some land with some shacks on it. A kind of ghost town. Thought I might move up there sometime.

Why don't you?

Too cold.

It's cold in Toronto. City cold.

There's no work, Georges said, rubbing his chin.

For retirement.

Like that.

Like the gold bars.

Something like.

Georges peeled up a long splinter of wood, leaving a gouge, a white tapered streak. The soft wet wood peeled back like skin. Then he began again, on a second splinter.

It's just a little fishing village. She's got a daughter.

The squatter nodded.

Ought to buy Hugh's contracting business, I suppose, said Georges after a time.

This is the man who killed himself?

Might as well have.

Why don't you buy it, then?

Had that business since I started with him. Got me taken on as an apprentice, and when I got my card I went to work for him. We were in school together. A month's difference in our ages. Hugh always did good work. Always worked hard.

You don't know why he jumped?

Business, I suppose.

Ah.

Oh, I got a half interest in this cabinet shop. You want contracting work, though.

The second splinter came up like the first, leaving a long pale scar. Georges leaned back against the wall of the cabin and stretched out his legs. It was beginning to get dark.

The squatter was telling how he met this woman he'd been living with before he lost his job. An accident. An accidental meeting. You had to take advantage of accidents. There was some sharpness hidden in the squatter's mild, bespectacled face, like pins in a shag carpet or a razor blade in an apple. He looked like beardless Lenin — perhaps that was it.

There was another story, about an uncle this time. The afternoon was gone. Georges put everything back into his pack and tied the cover down.

It was the sort of chance meeting which seems at the time vaguely freighted, and the next morning seems only the residue of a hangover. Georges had given the squatter his address, which the man had asked for. He had forgotten that, until months later when Nome turned up in Toronto. It was like an odor, this vague significance. Georges smelled it in the hallway when he returned from work one day, without knowing what it was. A faint anxiety took hold of him. He got a can of beer from the refrigerator and opened it, drank half. The door buzzer sounded.

Georges stood in the doorway, beer can in one hand. His other hand still gripped the doorknob; Henry Nome still waited safely in the hall. No word had yet been spoken.

I tried several times earlier, but you were out.

Georges excused his hesitation. You've got new glasses, he said. I didn't recognize you.

He had — large oval lenses instead of the small round ones suspended by thin gold wires.

The others were crushed, Nome said. These make me look less like Lenin, I think.

Come in.

He had been waiting there in the mountains for Georges, hadn't he? As John the Baptist must have waited, as a man waits in a bar for a friend who is late, drumming his fingers, munching fried locusts from a bowl, rattling them impatiently in his hand like dice, flicking them into his mouth one by one. Now and then he scratched himself, hands sliding up underneath his filthy jerkin of camel hair. He muttered. Repent ye, repent ye. Make way. Make way there? Humming, perhaps, some anticipatory music — Berlioz' *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale*.

Waiting. Sensing his approach, the time ripening. Planning: re-reading the background files, the vitae, the credit checks, security checks, anonymous denunciations; working out strategies, contingencies, redundancies, psychologies, integrities, abilities, civilities, communities of interest.

The inevitable dreams of carpenters.

Waiting, sensing his approach, as one waits for descendants. Waiting, like master and apprentice for each other. Waiting, in the mountains, in the depths of the mountains where no one goes. Days pass. Weeks. Checking and rechecking the maps and airlines guides, Cook's Timetables, the Hotel Redbook, looking for errors in the schedule. At last — intimations, faint vibrations, lourings, auspices, the whispering of owls, coarse-voiced crows exploding into the sky, black wings brushing the moiled cloud —

And what was to happen now? He, the harbinger, the precursor, the messenger, the ancestor — he was to lose his place, that's what. So he went and hid himself, didn't he? He snuck off into the mountains, skulking from imminence to impendence, starting from every loom and threat, retreating from the wind, slipping ever deeper, into the heart of the mountains where no one goes. But he could not escape. He was destined to be swallowed up, engulfed, dissipated, put out of existence.

It began as a heaviness of the air, a local density, first in the woods beyond the creek, a patch of cold smoky air lying in a swale, then a breeze like a single sigh on the hillside above the cabin, then on the porch just beside the door. Nome brushed his hand before his face, as if he had disturbed a spider web. Then it was a thickness in the water of the creek, as if some of it had jelled — congealed water that sucked him off his feet, swept under him and he floundered, half floating, half standing on the water. It flowed past and he sank head-first into the backwash. In the days following, the aspen that grew upstream, above the rapids, began to show a

callus on the bark, a bole the size of a hand — it was a hand, pushing up from within the tree, stretching beneath the bark. A face, shifting, vague, peered at him briefly from the branches. He felt as if someone was walking behind him and he turned abruptly — there was no one. He felt the brush of hands on his cheek at night, of breath in his hair. There, in the woods behind the cabin — a fleeting shadow, in the evening a figure lurking, one rainy morning a patch of color moving among the trees away up the slope —

And there he was, Georges Arqué, orange backpack and three check shirts. Georges was a large man, always hunched, with a humped nose and thick, splayed fingers. His flesh seemed made of soft clay — it was thick and grayish, wadded, flesh that would absorb a heavy blow — daubed over the dense armature of muscle and bone.

He stopped a short distance upstream from where Nome crouched in the water. He sucked his teeth and peered into the woods through a curtain of rain.

Been here long? he asked, casually.

Years and years.

On the road up from Eagle Bay, passing through the fingers of an ancient war, he was stopped by a down-vested cerberus, questioned.

Who gives you leave to pass?

The spirit of mountain. The heart of darkness. The world soul.

So much wind. Your papers.

I have none.

The marshal struck the map table with his fist. The table jumped, and one of the rifles leaning against it slid scratchily away and fell to the dirt floor with a thump.

Citizen of what country?

Property of the Bank of Toronto, sir.

Occupation?

Builder.

The inquisitor closed his eyes wearily. False, he said. What is your purpose in coming here?

I don't know, sir.

Excellent. Now we are beginning to get at the truth.

The inquisitor slammed the map table with his open hand and leaned forward.

The second rifle clattered to the ground on top of the first.

And how long will you stay?

I don't know.

You have a criminal record?

I don't know.

The inquisitor narrowed his yellow eyes. If that is so, he demanded, why did Hugh Sabotier jump to his death from your balcony?

So Hugh was dead. He had simply opened the balcony door and walked out.

Georges thought he might have wanted some fresh air. But he swung one leg over the railing, and then the other, and dropped from sight. How long had it taken

him to fall? One second. Was that sufficient time for a reconsideration? The curtains blew inward, the door slammed back against the wall, the glass panes shivered.

I don't know, Georges said again.

For the third time the map table jumped. The third rifle went over. There was a discreet pop and a hole appeared in the plastic wall of the shelter just beside George's knee.

Lightning flashed. Georges began counting automatically and had reached thirty-five when the thunder-clap burst — the storm was over the harbor. He went out on the balcony. When a storm blew up from the south it was possible to watch it advance over the lake, the storm front like a dirt-blackened glacier wall sliding forward on a cushion of mist. Whitecaps started up before it. And very rarely there would be lightning, the whole immense mass flickering briefly, suddenly translucent, with a bright layer of fire flashing over the cloud roof. Then it would be snuffed, black again, opaque.

It had been raining since early morning, a drizzle from a dark, close sky. The cars on the freeway had had their lights on. Out on the new Mississauga tract that Hugh had opened up it had seemed, if he would climb up into the rafters and onto the ridgepole of some house, that he could put his hand into the belly of the clouds. The whole deluge would pour out on him then, washing him off that half-built house into Etobicoke River, into the lake. Out to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and into the ocean finally, through the Cabot Strait that separates Newfoundland and Nova Scotia.

About noon a wind sprang up and blew it all away, and out of a clear, cold sky the other storm began to come in off the lake — the other storm which had been lying on the open water, waiting. The scud, the dirty tatters of cloud fled before the wind. Lightning flashed within the dark mass as it began to move forward. It touched land with a lambent finger, a single fulminous kiss.

Now, he thought, his hand on the open balcony door as the first squall lashed the streets a mile away. Now, he thought, his hand still on the doorknob as Henry Nome waited in the hallway. Now, he thought, years later, in bitterness, as he stood in the doorway of his son's darkened bedroom. The light from the hall cut across the child's bare legs like a wooden knife.

Now. Nothing has happened yet. Hugh Sabotier is still alive. Henry Nome waits in the mountains yet. Now, before anything is changed. Now, before it's too late. Jump! Tie the end of your scarf to the balcony rail and jump!

But no. He retreated. The balcony door was shut against the rain. The hall door was latched again and Georges turned to take Henry Nome's coat from him. The bedroom door closed softly on his sleeping child and the apartment fell silent.

The telephone rang. He stretched and tipped the receiver off the bookshelf, snagged the wire and pulled the handset toward him. It was Evan.

Georges? Is that you?

LE GRAND MEULIER

Years afterward, Jo came on the map among her brother Henry's papers. She had no idea what place it portrayed, but Henry had tucked it in among some letters of Nicola's. There was also a genealogy of the St. Hilaire, Coudres, and Arqué families on which Nicola had entered Jo and her brother in a brown, spidery hand. Thirty-five persons were tabulated there, in 2110 all dead except her two vulture uncles and herself. Five generations, arranged on the paper in layers. Ancestral geology. A kind of fault scarp, the layers exposed by the uplift of Henry's death, bringing his papers to the surface, striations of metamorphic rock in bright colors lying one on top of another, pushed up from deep within the earth.

The map, however, was of recent manufacture. Henry's work, perhaps — it bore the marks of his niggling. Ninety-three buildings were indicated; allowing for a few sheds and some abandoned ones, eight-five inhabited. That made a town of four hundred or so. There they are, the inhabitants: too small and ephemeral to be drawn in, known only by their artifacts. A hamlet of them.

Factus Junction. Scatburg, Relicton. But to the fifth generation, grown to thirteen thousand now — a town. They lie, twenty-five or thirty to a house, packed in five layers like political prisoners in the huts of a forced-labor camp. Yet still they are too transient, inconsequential, tiny. They are as imaginary as the automatic rifles and the barbed wire fences are when some agent of an international humanitarian group makes an inspection tour of the compound.

We are thin and faint. You must look out of the sides of your eyes to see us.

She reached out after a time and turned off the light. In the darkness she sat unmoving, fixing her memory of the place in her mind. In the dark the tectonics of the map appeared and now the viscous rock began to fold and overlay itself — here sinking, filled with water; there swelling up — but then crumbling away again in terraces, in an alluvial fan which the longshore current swept away in a spreading streak like floating hair. The moonlight glinted on the mullioned doors of the room.

Nicola St. Hilaire, eight years old, stared from the window of her grandmother Meulier's house on Moyen Street in the village. Her nose, pressed to the glass, was growing cold. Her mother had gone out again. Grandmother was watching television. It had been raining all day — the moon was hidden, the street black, and at the other end of Courte Street two blocks away the dock-house light made a glowing yellow ball of mist that was reflected against the underside of the clouds. L'Antre was soaked in for sure, and maybe the Blaireau Ridge

too. She probably couldn't see across the river even from the end of the spit. It was a poor night to take the skiff out. At least it was warm, and still. Nicola wished her mother were not so good a sailor, or that she would sink.

Nicola's breath was condensing on the glass. She drew her finger through it twice before the glass cleared again. Two blurry streaks remained. She squinted, and the streaks became two windblown trees in a rainstorm, near the summit of L'Antre. Fogging the glass, she quickly drew in the mountainside.

She was waiting for her grandmother to go to sleep in front of the television. There was a yellowed doily pinned to the back of the chair and when the old woman's head at last fell back the pins would catch in her bun. Then when she got up to go to bed the doily would come loose and dangle unnoticed behind, until she let down her hair before the tall mirror on the bureau in the bedroom. She would smile to herself, and cluck, and put the doily carefully aside to be pinned to the chair again in the morning.

Sometimes the doily would win, pulling the pins out of the old woman's hair when she woke with a start and leaned forward to turn off the television. Then her black hair would spill out and hang in loops down her back and she would brush it out there in the back parlor by the kitchen, telling Nicola how old Meulier had combed her hair until it shone, on winter nights when they were first married. Old Meulier had been a fisherman. He had drowned in a winter storm on another river. That was when Nicola's mother was small.

When Nicola was littler she had sat on her grandmother's lap and stared at the thick tufts of hair which grew in her nose. There was a lone, mahogany-stained tooth in her lower jaw, uncovered by a flaccid lip when she fell asleep. Then Nicola's mother would come and take the cigarette from the old woman's knobby fingers and flick it into the sink, muttering.

Nicola put on a wool sweater and a windbreaker and slipped out of the house. For a moment she stood looking down Courte Street toward the dock but then she went the other way, toward the Liscomb Bay Road. Water hung in the air. On Moyen Street it was all mud and Nicola kept to the gravel path that separated the houses from the street. On the Bay Road the asphalt gleamed in patches under a half-dozen lighted windows. She avoided these lights, walking quietly to keep from setting off the dogs. Between the second and third houses from the end a footpath turned off to the right, going up through a swale toward L'Antre, but forking when it reached the spruce cover on the lowest slope. One trail went around the mountain to the northwest,



crossed a ridge sixty meters above the ocean, and ended at Lac Morue. The other trail led through the defile between the Blaireau Ridge and the south arm of the mountain and ended at Point Fourchue just a hundred meters upriver from the lower end of the Bay Road, but separated from it by the branch of the Apohaqui River that was like a short, thick thumb gouging off the village from the mountain's bulk.

She picked her way up the footpath from the road, through the swale which was muddy with seepage and never froze. At the forking there had once been a sign but the post had rotted and now the signboard leaned upside down at the foot of a tree, arrows pointing the wrong way. Blaireau Ridge Trail, 2.1 km. People in the village called it the Point Road — it had been made a road by snowmobiles and four-wheel drive trucks. What they called the Ridge Trail went upriver to the village of Kennebucto, some abandoned shacks and the defunct Kennebucto mine. Nicola had been there once, in the summer that her mother brought her from Toronto. She was four, and Georges had had to carry her nearly all the way to the mine.

The Point Road was black between black walls of spruce but Nicola from experience knew the way it went and could sense obstacles in the darkness. Close

overhead the paler clouds swirled in the current flowing up the mountain. There was an acidic tea smell in the air.

Just where the road passed behind the ridge and began to rise up the shoulder of the mountain, avoiding the jumbled rock in the defile below, she felt the almost silent pass of an owl. It was a sound like a deep breath, with two wingbeats she felt in the pit of her stomach.

The end of the road ran down to the point, emerging from the trees onto the sand of the river bank. Nicola stood for a time at the edge of the water looking for the yellow light on the dock at the foot of Courte Street, but it was not visible through the mist. She turned upriver and rounded the point, keeping within the fringe of greater darkness at the edge of the trees. There, hidden from the village by the finger of L'Antre, was a cabin. From its porch, built on poles out into a swampy meadow, a half-sunken boardwalk ran down to the beach where the skiff was pulled up. The cabin was dark. Nicola crept up on it through the trees at the rear.

One of the back windows showed a crack of pale light. Nicola stood up on a pipe connecting to the side of the tank of heating oil and pressed her face to the glass, but could see nothing through the slightly parted curtains except an empty corner of the room. The light wavered on the dirty white wall. Slivers of old paint crumbled on the sill beneath her hands. She got down.

On the other side of the oil tank she found the chopping stump, which she hauled up beneath the window. Standing on the stump, she could see a different part of the familiar bare room. A kerosene lamp was burning on the floor beside the metal bed where Nicola's mother lay asleep. The quilt had slipped off her shoulders. Georges lay on his back between her and the bare wall, his mouth slackly open, hands crossed on his stomach.

Georges. Georges couldn't sail worth anything. He was a carpenter.

Nicola had one fear-tinged memory of him as he stood smiling in the doorway of her room in the apartment in Toronto. His hands in the pockets of his overcoat had bunched the material over his stomach. One shoulder was hunched higher than the other. Smiling caused his moustache to twitch.

Nicola sat on the chopping block for a while breaking a paint chip up into dust in her palm. Then she walked down to look at the skiff.

It was only a little single-hand boat, with a centerboard and a spritsail, that her mother had taught her to sail that summer. She was just heavy enough to steer it by leaning from side to side, if the wind were not too high. Tonight, in the shelter of L'Antre, there was hardly any wind. If she would round the point close on shore to keep out of the deep current that would pull her toward the far side she would be all right. In the slack water behind the spit she would have the boathouse light to guide her.

She tried to drag the skiff backward on the sand. It came easily.

But on the river it was blacker than she imagined it would be. Before she got the sail up the shoreline had faded back into the staring darkness and she could only guide herself by the breeze and the set of the current.

It was essential to keep to the lee side to avoid being swept out into the ocean. Beads of nervous perspiration began to form under her arms. The current in the river seemed to pick up. She bore to starboard. After a few moments a diffuse light appeared dead ahead, like a match that hisses wetly and dies. But then it flared up, with the bright core of a sodium-vapor lamp, and she bore hard to port to avoid running aground. The skiff slipped through the gap of the harbor entrance. Nicola's hand on the halyard relaxed.

She ran the two blocks up Courte Street. In the back parlor the television was now running with the sound off, but the old woman was still asleep. Nicola's hair was wet with mist. She got a towel and sat on the floor by her grandmother's chair and slowly rubbed her hair dry.

Ou est Nikki? the old woman asked, waking suddenly.

Avec Georges.

Grandmother Meulier smiled, her one brown tooth standing out. She leaned forward, turned off the television, and rose slowly to her feet. The doily hung from her bun by one crocheted point, like the remnant of a bride's coif, as she shuffled from the room.

Nikki would not return until morning now, when she could see the trail.

Nicola wrapped her hair in the towel and went to bed.

That winter Nikki was pregnant and in December she went back to Toronto to live. At the end of February a rail ticket came in the mail for Nicola and one of the old men who looked after Grandmother Meulier drove Nicola up to Sydney to catch the train. At the Sydney station he made arrangements with the clerk in French and went away immediately, anxious to be home before early dusk and leaving her to wait alone.

Nicola sat in a molded plastic chair by the window, the last chair in the row, with her paper sack of clothes occupying the chair beside her. She could see little of interest through the window, only a parking lot in which some light poles rose into a gloomy sky and the wall of a factory building. Lights were burning in the factory at mid-day. Here there were not the opalescent, swirling clouds of L'Antre. They were solid and dirty, like the underside of a sidewalk. The air stank.

Ce sont les fourneaux, the old man had said. Acier et houille. A Glace Bay i'y a un puits dans l'ocean — très allonge.

The dirt was something he took for granted. Coal dust covered everything, to him a curiosity. Nicola kept her hands in the pockets of her jacket, gazing from the

rail car at the plumes of smoke that rose a little way and then flattened out, coating the bottoms of the clouds.

Toronto was not so clean as she remembered, either. Some friends of her mother's met the train, a man who introduced himself as Henry Nome and claimed to have known Nicola when she was little. Nicola was dubious. He was a wispy man inclined to long, melancholy silences. The woman was harder, abler. Nicola sat in the back seat by herself and said nothing. They drove her to an apartment in the suburbs where there was nothing to do. Her mother was there, wan and depressed, and the baby. It was a boy, which they had named Jean. Its second name was neither St. Hilaire nor Meulier, but Arqué, after Georges. She stayed four days, and spent most of the time in her mother's bedroom sitting by the bassinet. Once Georges came to the door, but he only stayed in the hall talking in a low voice with Henry Nome. He kept his hands in the pockets of his trench-coat, rucking up the material in front. Georges, being a tall, thickset man, was obliged to stoop and bend, and seemed to whisper into Henry's hair.

At the end of the week they took her back to the train. Henry was in a better mood and made a few jokes to which no one listened very carefully. Nicola sat in the back seat again, her cheek against the cold glass window.

When summer came Nikki returned alone to the village. She looked haggard, and as time passed she grew fat. Georges reappeared — he had taken over a shack at Kennebucto. After that Nikki and Grandmother often sat for hours in the kitchen, talking in low voices, drinking wine or coffee and brandy. Nicola lay in bed listening, hardly breathing, but she could not understand them.

They never went sailing now — Georges came for Nikki in a Landrover.

Sometimes there were others with him, and once Nicola thought she recognized Henry Nome — his thin face and spectacles beneath a black cloth cap. She disliked the whining of the Landrover's gearbox, audible so many blocks away. The truck ground slowly through the pitted village streets, bucking-Georges drove straight over all the ruts and potholes.

Waiting, Nikki grew restless. After lunch she sat in the front parlor, unable to pass the time. The house had few books and she had never learned to knit or crochet, or simply to sit, so that every few minutes she pushed aside the window curtain with her finger and let it fall again, vainly. Sometimes she patched some of Nicola's clothes or, on warm afternoons when Nicola had to go out walking with her grandmother, Nikki went along.

Wait! Wait! she called out, running up the street after them. One arm was caught in the sleeve of a sweater, an old cardigan of coarse gray wool, and she struggled with it as she ran. It had been her father's. She swam in it, running crookedly, akimbo, pushing the bil-

lows of wool away from her face, and arrived at their side laughing, out of breath.

Then they would walk. The old woman shuffled between the other two, grinning, her rough and callused hand on Nicola's bare arm. Along Moyen Street to the intersection with Gourin and the Cove Road, down Gourin past the big house, back along South Street to the alley that ran along the old mill race behind the Gourin house, up the alley and home again on Moyen Street. These slow six blocks took the heart of the afternoon. Sometimes they turned left onto Apohaqui Cove Road rather than right onto Gourin Street, or continued straight, down Anne to the Chemin de l'Anse and back, but most often it was to Gourin's old gristmill they went.

The mill race, no wider than a culvert, was now silted up and overgrown.

Nikki remembered when after a rainstorm it still ran with floodwater from the creek, and her grandfather saying he once had a little corn ground there. Now the mill wheel was grown into the ground, turned very slowly by the hard earth, rusting. It was all Pierre Gourin's idea, flushed copper red with the success of the Kennebucto mine. But it never amounted to anything. The copper failed too, as a matter of course, and Gourin went back to mining coal farther north, leaving the house he had built to some MacPherson, his wife's relative. Grandmother Meulier, an old sans-culotte, had no good to say about Chez Gourin or the parvenu MacPhersons either, but Nikki left the old woman muttering, her face turned to the sun, and dragged Nicola inside to look at the millworks.

Not much had changed during the winter. A few more boards had fallen off the west wall, making it less gloomy, and as a consequence the weeds were thicker this year. The millstones seemed to have sunk deeper into the ground. One lay flat in the grass, almost flush, the upper stone lying against it like the lid of a box half off.

Nikki rubbed the edge of the tilted stone with her thumb, looking out through a chink at the mill wheel outside. Sunshine dappled her hair and streaked the sweater's gray with thick yellow butter. She sat down on a crosspiece of collapsed scaffolding and picked the heads of some of the weeds growing along the wall.

When I was little, she said, you could still find wheat growing here.

She tickled Nicola with the hairy weed. Nicola slapped it away.

Sixty or seventy generations of heat. It must have died out finally. Maybe it's too early, Nicola suggested.

No, it died out. I was always fond of the stones, especially, because my name was Meulier. I'd lie there and try to imagine Le Grand Meulier, that remotest ancestor who made the millstones. To cut rock, to grind it so flat, so round, like a cheese. Rock was like cheese to that one. And then to carry them here on his back — he

must have been a great, hard man. I'd run home full of questions about Father. How tall had he been, and how strong, and could he have carried a millstone down from L'Antre? Oh, I was very young, Much younger than you — you are so solemn and clever. How disappointed I was to learn the stones came from Boston, bought ready-made from someone named Sturtevant.

I'm cold, Nicola said.

Do you want my sweater?

No.

They went back out into the sunshine. The old woman had walked up the alley a ways and was looking at MacPherson's cabbages growing in the patch beside the shed. Her heavy black shoes and white stockings, her hands in the pockets of the man's jacket that she wore over her thin print housedress, some coils of black hair come loose from her bun —

Watch, Nikki whispered. Your grandmother will ask if we've learned what vainglory is, from old Gourin's mistake.

The old woman turned to them, hunched, her hands still in her pockets. Enfin! Vous savez l'orgueil maintenant, hein?

Her eyes glittered with mischief. Nicola giggled, and the two younger women burst out laughing together. But then came the whining of the Landrover, and Nikki frowned. The three of them set out for home in silence. Georges was waiting, leaning against the buff, mud-spattered fender.

He stayed sometimes, to eat something from a paper plate, hastily, standing on the porch with the plate held close to his mouth, eyes darting from under his brows. Sometimes, more relaxed, he stayed to talk idly with Nikki or the old woman, to repair something in the house, or only to watch some match on television. But more often there would be no idle talk — just a terse, muttered greeting, a short exchange, and Nikki would get in. Nicola watched from the front parlor, pushing the curtain aside with her finger.

She went to the beach with them once. Georges drove the Landrover through the creek at the end of Lanark Road and parked it on the sand, and they walked down to the end of the spit and back. Nicola followed behind, picking up bits of shell. Ahead, Georges and Nikki walked together and talked in low voices. They went along clumsily, floundering, insecurely attached together. Georges had thrown his arm around her shoulders but Nikki walked with her arms huddled. They threw each other off balance. When she lurched, he stumbled, and his misstep caused her to stagger. Nicola trudged behind, picked up scraps of things the ocean had ground up, and smiled to herself. Fragments of conversation reached her. Nikki was to go back to Toronto. Nicola's brother Jean, left with Ciel Nome for the summer, had had a fit — seizure or perhaps just a spasm. A doctor was watching for signs of epilepsy. Nicola was to go on living with her grandmother.

At the end of the spit, looking out into the mouth of the river, they sat on a driftwood log. Nikki bent and scooped up a handful of coarse sand which she let run through her fingers.

Sand is milled rock, she said, scooping up another handful. Look, you can see the rock chips in it. The current will carry it south. The farther south it goes the higher the surf, and the sand will get finer and whiter and finer and white —

She laughed and dribbled some sand on Nicola's bare foot.

This is the work of Le Grand Meulier, eh? He's somewhere up on L'Antre making grindstones, and the river brings down the rock dust he makes.

Nicola shook the sand from her foot. I'm going wading, she said.

Georges and Nikki exchanged covert glances. The water was icy. After a time they started back.

The beach had been empty before, but now a beach-comber appeared, a little figure in the distance criss-crossing the tide line, stooping here and there like a sandpiper. Then he vanished. A little later he reappeared near the lower tidal pool, and vanished again. They found him sitting on a spur of rock near the Landrover. It was Henry Nome.

Georges and Henry shook hands. They walked on ahead. When did you come up, then?

An hour ago. I left my things in the cabin.

How long can you stay?

Until Monday. Jean is all right. Is Nikki coming back with you?

Yes. Next week, or the week after.

What have you found out?

The two men passed out of earshot. Georges was speaking intently, hunched forward, tracing some lines on his palm. Henry's eyes were turned toward the sea. Then he stopped. Georges pointed toward L'Antre, at the broad vertical face of the peak. There were caves in the rock face, at the back of an open knoll. The mouth of the largest was clearly visible. Henry nodded, and they went on.

So at the end of the next week Georges went back to Toronto and Nikki went with him. Nicola was left behind. After Christmas her grandmother died and she went to live with a neighbor. The winter passed in silence — the soft silence of old people's habits, of snow-smothered roads, of listening at night for small sounds — a cough, the rustle of sheets, the restless turning over in bed waiting for sleep — which would indicate that death had not yet come. She wrote to her mother and received replies in French, full of excuses. Finally, at Easter, Nikki opened the house on Moyen Street again. But she was distant, nervous. She had quit speaking English. For weeks a letter from Georges lay on the bureau unopened, reflected in the tall mirror. After school Nicola would open the door of her mother's bedroom to see if the letter was still there. The room, un-

changed, smelled faintly of her grandmother's perfume. The envelope lay, still and mysterious in the pale spring light, reflected in the canted mirror, handwritten address indecipherable beneath small white jars of cold cream and salves her mother never used.

Then one day the letter was gone. And Georges returned. He brought her little brother Jean, who was taking some medicine that could not be found in the village, so that Georges had to go after it once a week until some arrangements could be made. Henry and Ciel Nome came up too, with their two year old William, and they all lived for days in the house in the village until Georges had finished repairing the cabin at Kennebucto.

Nikki spoke nothing but French, which the Nomes did not understand, and kept to her bedroom. During the day she was gone to work in the village post office. Georges slept in the house, but at night the bedroom was quiet save for his soft curses, French muttering. The jars and bottles on the bureau were taken away, but the smell of perfumes, cold cream, and old women's salves remained.

Jean and William fought continually, ineffectually. They were too small to mount pitched battles or campaigns of terror, but had to be satisfied with petty vindictiveness and with screaming. Yet Jean managed, accidentally successful, to hit William with a stone. He had been obsessively gathering pebbles all afternoon from the rubbly corner lot on which the neighborhood cars were parked. He had made a hoard just under the edge of the porch, money which he had no qualms about throwing at small, curious robbers. He hit the bone at the edge of William's eye.

Nicola retrieved the stone, a round pebble of quartz streaked with red and yellow, which she later spent hours pulverizing with a hammer to find out how much effort was required to do it. Now Ciel came out, drawn by William's shriek. William fell silent. Jean sat on the narrow strip of dirt between the porch and the street aloofly piling up his pebbles again beneath the step. And Nicola watched from a corner of the porch, fingering the stone in her pocket.

But it was Jean who Ciel picked up to comfort, not her own son. William stared, twice hurt, confused. Nicola shook her head in warning to Ciel. Jean burst into remorseful tears, burying his face against Ciel's neck.

Ciel squatted on her heels. You see, she said, ruffling William's hair with her free hand. You provoked him. He's sorry.

William thought it over. Solemnly and ceremoniously he patted the other boy on the head. But the truce was short-lived. Jean made a few half-hearted attempts to defend his pebble collection, which at last he abandoned with a sigh.

Inevitably, amid the confusion and ill will, Jean's medicine was forgotten. He had a seizure. One evening at bedtime, standing in his crib, he was extinguished.

Nicola, sitting on the edge of her bed darning a sock for herself, sensed something odd and looked up. He hadn't fallen, but stared at her with sightless eyes. She shivered, sticking herself with the needle. Then Jean's head tipped to one side, his eyes rolled up, and he sat down. Nicola very carefully wove her needle into the toe of her work, laid the sock on the bed, and crossed the hall to her mother's room.

Jean had a fit, she said. Her voice was a little squeaky.

Nikki had been reading. When she raised her head the reading light cast harsh shadows over her face. She reached for her cigarettes.

Pourquoi personne ne lui a donne son drogue?

Nicola continued to stand in the doorway, uncertain. When her mother continued to read, she closed the door softly and went to get Ciel.

What was she to have done? she wondered as she hit the red- and yellowshot pebble with a hammer. She had not known how to follow Ciel's example. The pebble cracked in half. The streaks did go all the way through. She hit the pieces again.

Ciel seemed to be a lot like her grandmother must have been when she was young. A little less impish than her grandmother, maybe. Nicola pounded the fragments of pebble until there were too many to count. One stung her on the cheek.

Those women were like stone — dignified, patient. Her mother was not much like that.

She scraped the chips of quartz into a smaller pile and brought the hammer down on them. Again and again she swung the hammer, grinding the little quartz pebble ever finer, ever whiter, until her clenched fingers hurt so that she could no longer grip the handle and the hammer flew across the yard and into the bushes beyond the garden.

When at last they all went up to Kennebucto, Nikki did not go. She stayed by herself in the village, in her mother's house on Moyen Street, and continued to work in the post office sorting letters, filling the boxes and mail bags, managing the counter. The postmaster seldom bothered her — his sinecure required only the daily run to Liscomb Bay and back with the mailbags. The Halifax newspaper reached her three days late. At home, she removed the crocheted doily from the back of the television chair to prevent its catching in her hair.

Nicola spent the summer roaming in the hills, looking for the fossil bones of Le Grand Meulier, and in the autumn she went with Georges back to Toronto. Her mother came up the river to Kennebucto once, in the skiff.

There was a pier of which only two posts remained, where Nikki tied up the boat. She waded ashore through gelid water. They had all gone down to the water to meet her. Everyone behaved with bizarre civility, exactly as if a curious villager had come up to see what arrangements the communards had made in the place

where on Sundays past she had been accustomed to come now and then for a picnic. She stood on the bank among them, white deck shoes in her hand, jeans rolled up to her knees, looking from face to face. Nicola could not meet her mother's eyes at first, but found that she could not look at her naked feet, either — so starkly white, bony, blue-veined, the toes crushed together.

The three of them — Nikki, Nicola, and Jean — went by themselves up into the hills above the mine. They walked aimlessly for several hours, Nikki chattering intermittently. She had brought a lunch in a day pack and when Jean became tired they sat down on a slope of fireweed, Queen Anne's lace, and tansy. Tearing a chunk of bread from the loaf which lay on the grass, Nikki pointed to the buildings below.

Georges t'a porté ici une fois à ses épaules, t'en seuviens-tu? Tu avais quatre ans — c'était le premier été que je t'ai amené ici. C'était quand Georges avait cette idée. Pauvre Georges — tu étais si lourde pour qu'il puisse te porter toute cette distance.

Nicola picked up a plum and said nothing. A hare with one white spot on its haunch bounded across an open space in the bushes to their left.

Georges est très solide, n'est-ce pas? Si grave. Il travaille beaucoup.

Jean had fallen asleep.

Nikki scratched her bare ankle and sighed.

Nous devons partir, she said at last.

She stood up. Nicola took the day pack with the remains of their lunch and Nikki picked up Jean, who nestled his flushed cheek into the hollow of her shoulder and fell asleep again.

Later, as Nikki was putting Jean to bed, she noticed in Nicola's room a map of the Maritime Provinces which Georges had gotten for Nicola to put up as a decoration. For a long time Nikki stood looking at it, putting her finger down here and there. Suddenly she burst into delighted laughter.

Oh, regarde, ici c'est une Ile de le Meulier. Elle est une des Iles de la Madeleine, dans le Golfe du St-Laurent.

Nicola bit her tongue. Her mother continued to stare at the map, seemingly oblivious. White-eyed, Nicola ran out.

The sun had already withdrawn from the surface of the river when Nikki went down to the pier, but it still shone on the hillsides. Nicola, sitting on the rocks upstream, watched her mother go. Nikki cast off the painter. The skiff moved away into the current. The sail went up, cracking as the breeze filled it, and a white curl of water twisted away from the bow. Nikki, gripping the rudder and the halyard with one hand, leaned gracefully backward over the water and exultantly threw the butt of her cigarette as far as she could. It arched out, sparkling in the dusk.

It was the winter before, when Nikki's mother died and she went to work as a postal clerk, that she started

smoking. She lost weight then. When she was an old woman she was thin, almost gaunt, and she coughed incessantly.

Nicola was herself an old woman of almost sixty then, and the two of them sat in the kitchen talking in low voices while the others ate supper in the front parlor. Nikki seemed much bemused, as if in half a century she had so forgotten them that in the evening, when they were gone again, she would stare thoughtfully from the front window into the empty street, her finger parting the curtain, shaking her head in puzzled wonder. Of necessity, they spoke English — Nicola had forgotten her French. The words were spoken with a little amused maliciousness on Nikki's part, but for Nicola they were as bitter as vomit.

There had been a photograph made that afternoon. Perhaps it lay on the table between them, pushed stealthily forward and backward, an inheritance neither

of them wanted. Years afterward, Jo found it among Nicola's letters.

The brash laughter of Nicola's son Henry reached them, and the giggling of Henry's feeble-minded daughter. It was plain that everything with which Nicola had unconsciously thought to grieve her mother was as ashes.

Jo, sitting in her dimly lit study with the map, the letters, the photographs — all that was left of five generations — tried to overhear what passed between them, but it was a faint murmuring difficult to understand. Perhaps, as they were getting into the car for the drive back to Halifax, Nikki had leaned through the window and put her hand on Nicola's shoulder.

Bon voyage, Madame le Grand Meulier.

Or would she have remained silent, smiling slightly as she stood on the porch to wave goodbye?

SQUINTING INTO THE SUN

That summer at the Kennebucto hermitage Henry Nome made a picture of them, intending to hang it as a memento mori. But he never did. Here it is, a photograph made to resemble that from a box camera, a snapshot taken on a warm summer day of two men and a woman standing in the sun in front of the workshop door. It is a courtyard, with walls of soft gray weathered wood. There are signs of refurbishment, reconstruction — a new roof on the commons, a new window in the cloister wall, new eaves, new stairs. Pale curls of wood lie in the new grass, lushly blue-green, at their feet. The three of them smile, these visionaries, squinting into the sun, leaning slightly together, congenially out of plumb like the old buildings themselves. And yet there is something here disturbing. Filled with apprehension, one looks more closely. What is wrong with this picture?

Henry Nome has three eyes

Nome was half asleep, lying fat-tongued and heavy on a sunwarmed rock in the river, upstream from the compound, when the alarm went up. A cold breeze blew up the river, carrying with it faint sounds of a commotion, and passed on.

Nome shivered. He shifted a little in the hollows of the warm gray stone, trying to sink deeper into the inherited fire in its crystalline crust, deep into the ancient, native warmth of its sunless heart. Minutes passed. Abruptly, he woke. Pulling on his pants, still barefoot and shirtless, he scrambled off the rock and ran silently down the path to the compound.

The forge was on fire. Ciel and the children were running back and forth with buckets of water and blankets soaked in the river. A thin stream of black smoke leaked out under the lintel. There was no flame, yet —

Over here!

It was Georges, hastily rigging a means of attaching a garden hose to the nozzle of the wellhead pump.

Serious?

Doesn't look like it, Georges replied. I think they got it out. This is just in case.

What happened?

Spark in some rags, looks like. Had the forge banked yesterday. Flared up or something.

One of the kids messing with it?

They say not. Try the pump.

Nome worked the pump handle. The junction, wrapped with wire and cloth, leaked and spurted but delivered water at a modest pressure. Georges threw down the pliers and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. His face was livid with greasy soot, streaked with sweat.

It'll do, he said. All the fires are downhill.

Where'd you get the hose?

Up in the old equipment shed, eh? It's pretty stiff.

The pliers had fallen into a mud puddle. Georges retrieved them and rinsed them in a pail of water, which suddenly he threw, pail, pliers and all, in the direction of the fire. The water arched up, separated into glittering beads, and fell with a splat, a wet line on the courtyard dirt twenty feet short of the forge wall.

But the fire was more serious than it first appeared to be. It had sunk into the old oily boards and continued to burn stubbornly, stealthily. In the afternoon it flared up, and again at dusk. They set a watch on it.

Henry Nome sat on a broken-backed cane chair in the doorway of the forge, watching the sunset. The sun was gone; the furzy hills behind the compound were in shadow; but in the sky lingered streamers of luminous pink and cerulean which reminded him of the last page of a book from his childhood. Within, the shed was dark, full of the smell of cold, sleeping fire: charred wood, greasy smoke, wet ashes. These smells live forever, he thought. A burned building has a soul eternally blackened, which haunts the spot long after the building is gone.

Across the courtyard the commons was dark. Supper was over; the children had gone down to the river. Nome leaned back against the jamb, arms folded across his chest.

They should have given some thought to fire when they planned this place.

The work sheds and storage buildings which formed one side of the square were detached, but that had been done for economy, and to control dirt and pests, not fire. The other three sides of the court were formed by a single building, living quarters in each wing and commons in the center, which had been carpentered together from a street of standing shacks, the individual buildings connected with the walls and roofs knocked out of the rest of the shacks in the block. They had taken only what they needed — the compound stood in an uncleared woods of empty shacks. The arrangement was efficient and comfortable, but the spirit of old fires must linger here, in the old wood, in the ground. It would spring up now and then, inevitably. It would run through all the old buildings easily.

The wavering light of a kerosene lamp expanded slowly in Nome's sitting room. Ciel was putting their son William to bed. Soon a parallel light appeared in the opposite wing as Georges put his own son to bed. Nicola would be out until long after dark — a wood mouse, seldom seen.

There had been talk of roofing over the courtyard before winter. People would huddle together in winter. More comfort, less security.

There had been talk off and on, too, of bringing some others in. The compound could easily be extended by attaching more of the empty shacks to make a double square or an H-shaped ground plan without disturbing the central importance of the commons in the crossing. A month would suffice to put up shelter for four more families. The question was whether more were wanted. Once it had seemed like a good idea.

After a time Georges emerged into the dusky courtyard and ambled diagonally across to the forge, hands in his pockets. Since Nikki had left him he had become slightly more taciturn, more withdrawn, if that were possible. Not surprisingly now, sitting on his heels, leaning against the wall of the forge, he had nothing to say.

Fire's out, Nome commented a bit later.

It's hiding.

Maybe. You've been keeping the kids out?

Chain on the door last night.

Rags in the middle of the floor, Georges. Rags and wood chips piled up. Kids' work, don't you think?

Spark jumped out. You got to expect a forge to burn down.

Doesn't have to jump into something.

Georges shrugged. Rats, maybe. Raccoons or something.

You had the fire banked, you said.

Was going to get back to it today.

It was all torn up, Georges. You could see that yourself.

Georges worried an imaginary bit of food from between two of his teeth with his tongue, then chewed on it for a while. He shifted slightly.

Who do you suppose? he said.

Hard to say, isn't it?

Georges gazed off in the direction of the ocean, at some stars which had appeared there in the darkening sky.

It ought to be looked into, Nome observed.

Georges sighed, but said nothing. Ten minutes later he stood, stretched, and moved off across the courtyard toward the commons. Nome, who had fallen into a reverie, did not particularly notice him go, until some time afterward he woke with a start to find himself alone. A surge of adrenalin left him momentarily breathless. He shifted a little on his chair, mastering himself.

Georges, always a little restless when there was no work for his hands, was probably sitting in the dark in the commons. Sometimes he went to sleep there on a straight chair, slumped against the wall. When they woke him he claimed to be waiting up for Nicola.

Nome's thoughts, cold as a thin fog, began to drift again and finally dispersed, leaving in his mind the crisp clarity of night air. A high cirrus obscured the

overhead stars but left a girdle of scattered lights along the horizon.

Georges Arqué is not standing on the ground

That summer Georges began work on a refectory table for the commons. Most of what they used was plank and nail furniture but Georges, imbued with the symbolic value of a commons table, was determined to take pains. He had found some good oak. He made drawings for a spacious table for eight, carved and inlaid, substantial. He would have all winter to finish it.

He worked without speaking, putting out the drawings, his tools, wood. Nome looked on from the shop doorway. Georges laid out the rails and stretchers of the frame, trying the pieces a dozen different ways for grain and color. He measured the wood, marked it, measured again. He changed the blade in the table saw, adjusted the fence; he made back-to-back cuts in scrap stock to check the trueness of the table.

For god's sake, Georges. Cut something.

Georges took up the first piece of wood, pale wheat rayed with ocher, and rubbed his thumb over it. The saw whined, waiting to slice out its precisely walled kerf —

Nome realized he had been holding his breath, and the air exploded from his throat. Georges finished the cut and turned off the saw. He measured the piece, then put both it and the waste stock aside.

Where'd you liberate the wood?

Shack wood, mostly, Georges said, taking up a second piece.

Build a shack out of oak?

Amazing, isn't it? Cut down a hundred years ago but a little milling and its fine.

He ran his thumb across the wood, measured, marked, studied the plans. How many separate acts were required to make such a table? Ten thousand? Ten times that, perhaps, and each one studied, meditated on as carefully as a Zen master. He would never finish. Nome sighed and sat down.

When Georges had cut the table frame he began on the corner blocks.

It's the heart of the piece, eh?

That depends on what you mean by heart, Nome replied cautiously. Georges seemed disgusted. I would have thought the top, Nome went on. Its public character, its finish —

Georges took up the corner block he had just cut and fit it into place, ignoring the jab. The butt of the leg fits here, he said, between the stretchers, and the screw draws it toward the corner block, so. The leg wants to move this way, the stretchers that. It locks together.

He compressed the heel of one hand into the palm of the other. Everything must be exactly so, eh? A little wobble, a little uneven, it begins to twist, it crumples

eventually. Again he demonstrated the motion with his thick, square hands.

And that's the heart of it? Each part holds the others in place?

Georges shrugged and picked up a piece of wood, which he examined self-consciously.

Well, it's a democratic principle of construction, anyway, Georges. I suppose we can permit it. There's an air of militarism about it, though. A little too much discipline, don't you think?

Over the summer the work went on with what, to Nome, was intolerable slowness. He found Georges one evening working a gouge across a bas-relief panel on one of the frame rails, a carving he had been touching up for a week. When that was done there were three others. The motif was simple, a pattern of linked squares. The same pattern would appear on the legs and would be carved along the edges of the top, as well as inlaid in the top itself. When Georges began work Nome asked why he didn't do something traditional — ivy leaves, cornucopias, grapes. Can't be carved in oak, he was told. The grain has too much character. Violates the spirit of the wood.

When are you going to get this thing together, Georges?

Georges shrugged. It's not worth building if it's not done right, he said after a time.

It's not building if you don't finish. We want to use it, Georges, and ding it all up.

Georges said nothing. He went on removing minute specks of wood from the recesses of the panel, but his hand trembled. He put down the gouge and picked up a sanding block, turned the panel over and began to smooth the back.

When I was about ten, he said, my bedroom was painted. My bed was under a window and I used to lie in bed looking at the underside of the sill that the painters had missed. They let it go because it was out of the way, I suppose. Thought nobody would see it.

Why didn't you paint it yourself?

I did. Georges rubbed his fingers over the wood and, satisfied, set the piece aside. I did paint it, he said, but it was still there, under the paint. So I moved my bed.

Resetting the stops on the workbench, he clamped down the second stretcher, the pattern of linked squares already traced on it. From a drawer he took a small case of router bits. As he bent over the work the whine of the router prevented any more talk. Nome watched for a time, then moved off.

And now someone had taken the sawdust and wood chips from this work and tried to burn down the forge with them. The fire lay hidden within the forge, as Georges had said, needing only a touch to draw it out. With a stroke, affectionate, of love for the things of the world, it would begin to seep like clear oil from the pores of the wooden walls. It would seep from the long,

ascending cracks, like ghostly sap from between the layers, the mica-like imbrications of the charred wood. It would flow down to form softly radiant puddles, pool in the hollows worn in the packed dirt by the routine of the dead smith. In clearing out the old forge they had discovered these footworn hollows beneath the lank, pale grass and the strew of rusty iron scrap, the only memorial in this place to that unknown man. In the darkness of the forge a figure kneels by the banked coals, holding out its hands to the dull, mahogany glow. The lambent pools flare up; blue fire flashes across the walls. The figure turns, face a mask of firelit planes and featureless shadows.

Who? Whose touch?

With each slight movement the figure's mask changes, a new geometry of light and shadow altering its appearance. What must the world seem to such a creature, who can summon the appearance of everything that is or has been? Seen with eyes of fire, the world must seem a trifling, transient place. In the mind of fire, which consumes everything, can there be any understanding? The present appears out of the fluxion of the past like a stream of molten iron, burningly tender, too bright, too hot even to look at. The past, an illusion, a mystery consumed by the eternal burning present, will not yield to mortal detectives, surely.

His chair slipped. He sat up bolt, the chair's front legs coming down with a bang on the plant which lay on the ground in front of the threshold. But the compound was quiet, and after a moment Nome smiled at having been taken in by such an accident.

Still, he thought, the fire ought to be looked into, nevertheless.

For being so different, he and Georges were certainly a lot alike.

Another half hour passed while he watched the cirrus break up. The moon appeared briefly. There would be a change in the weather, he speculated, and in a few weeks the first faint signs of winter. It would be their first winter in this place, a season as new as creation.

The wind blows only on the left, tugging Ciel's skirt

Georges stood at the darkened window of Ciel's bedroom, hands behind his back, gazing into the courtyard. The broken chair lay on its side on the ground in front of the forge like some animal struck by a car. Nome was gone.

Behind him, Ciel was darning one of her woolen boot socks, using an old light bulb to give it shape. She bent close to the kerosene lamp, needing the light and finding the oily smell soothing. There was much here that was soothing. During the summer she had drifted into a sleepy calm deeper than any she had experienced. With one slow stitch after another she filled in the thinned weave of her sock with fat new thread.

Something's troubling you, Georges?

He lifted his head a bit, loosened the clasp of his hands, but said nothing. What a gloomy, difficult man. It was no wonder Nikki had left him.

Girl runs too wild, he said abruptly.

Nikki's girl. They had all taken responsibility for Nicola, but Georges felt the weight particularly. A coward.

There are some smugglers down on the river, he said, turning.

Are there?

Nicola's seen them. I went down on the point road yesterday to take a look. Nobody there. Some boxes of something stored in the cabin. Been bringing a four-wheel drive truck in there — grass is all torn up in the meadow.

What was in the boxes?

Don't know. Didn't look. Drugs, probably. Only thing worth smuggling. If there's trouble we'll be blamed, won't we?

Just as like to be.

How long has this been?

Georges rubbed his chin. A week, he said.

You weren't going to say anything, were you? And not worry us.

She glanced up, chiding him. It had been easier for him to say nothing than to face the danger. A coward.

The people running this end of it, Georges went on doggedly after a few minutes, are probably over in Kennebucto. They counted on using the mine, I suppose, until they found us here.

So there was a fire, is that it? We're in their way.

Looks like.

What have you said to Henry?

Nothing. He's going to look into it, he says. Won't be long before he finds out.

Ciel finished repairing the sock and took up a shirt of Nicola's that had been torn on some briars. But she put it down again, pushed the needle through the pocket flap of her chamois shirt, and trimmed the lamp.

Nicola should stick closer, Georges muttered.

A blue thread attached to the needle lay crinkled against the breast of Ciel's shirt. She began to smooth it out with a stroking of her finger. The kerosene lamp made a slight noise, like breathing.

I hear there's somebody living up on the mountain, said Georges.

What, on L'Antre? Who?

Don't know. In the caves, I guess. Nobody's seen him, just some campfire or something. Heard it from a man in the post office when I was down in the village.

They never got mail — what was he doing in the post office? Nikki would have been there, of course. Ciel noticed that Georges' eyes were fastened on her breast — she pulled the thread out straight and folded her hands in her lap. Georges, embarrassed, turned back to the window.

With his face turned from her, Ciel allowed her eyes to rest on him more bluntly than usual. He was a large man, made muscular by work, with huge square hands. His face, too, was square and hard: pale lips, high cheekbones, heavy beaked nose. She wondered what it was had attracted Nikki to him.

The moon, setting, had dropped behind the hills and the courtyard seemed now more deserted. The broken chair lay, forlorn as a headless doll, half sunk in a mud puddle of darkness. In the opposite wing a small light burned, making a nebulous glow in the window of Nicola's room.

That spring in Toronto, the last when they were all together, Georges built a kite. They would go down to the harbor islands and fly it over the lake, he said. It was something he had wanted to do for a long time.

In the spring, Georges said. When the wind is good.

It was to be a box kite. Georges had never imagined anything but an enormous military reconnaissance kite of aluminum and canvas, with a line as thick as his thumb stretching out low over the lake, a graceful catenary of a thousand yards, two thousand.

But such kites weren't available any longer as military surplus. A smaller one, perhaps? Of spruce; of more modern materials — nylon, plastic, mylar. Something lighter, more efficient. No. It must be so, and so. Thus. Irrevocable.

Georges, normally so indecisive and gloomy, was in high spirits. And the kite proved to be a simple business after all: a few lengths of aluminum tubing, some light canvas hemmed on Ciel's sewing machine, some loops of cloth, some bolts. Finished, it weighed four pounds and a little. Georges hefted it experimentally. Surely the sail area was adequate?

It's going to take a helluva wind, said Nome, looking on.

There was a picture of them all from this time, Georges and Henry and Ciel and the kite. It had the air of a war-time photo — two army buddies home on leave, arms around their girls, everyone laughing light-headedly. Jo found the picture in an envelope addressed to Henry Nome in Boston, in the folds of two letters from an earlier time. One was Georges' original, heavily scrawled front and back in a combination of blotchy pen and dull pencil. With it was a typewriter carbon of Nome's reply.

Please excuse my writing, Georges began. I cut my hand ripping out drywall and it is swollen some so I can't hold a hammer but it will be all right. Nikki is gone back to Nova Scotia. I will go when I can get away. I asked that dentist I wrote you about to give me something on account for the work I did on his kitchen. He thought I was calling him a deadbeat I guess because we talked pretty loud and when I got home I couldn't eat anything. So I am still short. Hugh never used to lose his temper.

She unfolded the other letter.

Dear Georges — we are moving again. Ciel has gotten a better job, as a secretary in the economics dept. My own situation continues dismal. I am eking out an income of sorts as a research assistant and have been able to pick up extra money as a subject of experiments — my work has appeared in the recent literature under the pseudonym of 'S' — but for the most part this isn't worth the trouble or the hazard. Ciel has spotted a notice for a sleep research group which I am going to investigate, but as it was a couple of months old I hold out little hope. I see by your letter you have slid again into apostasy. When we come up after Christmas I shall have to reconvert you to a more pragmatic view. We must proceed with present resources. To advance the program you envision would require one of the great abbots of Cluny — to extort enough money for it from dentists is quite hopeless, and only excuse to do nothing.

The margin of the letter contained a note to Georges from Ciel. It gave her an uneasy feeling to read her own writing, which always seemed the words of someone not entirely familiar or reliable. Ciel refolded the letters around the photograph and bundled them up again with the others. She had hoped to find out something about Georges and Nikki from a time before she knew them. But there was nothing, only these interminable arguments, and she put the shoebox of Henry's correspondence back on the closet shelf.

For weeks they had waited for the right wind. She and Georges had painted the kite, covered every surface with bright mandalas and scrollwork and Georges' favorite interlocking squares. Spring came. It rained. Still there was no wind.

You're waiting for a damn hurricane, that's why, Nome said.

It had been the same with the table Georges built. When the frame was ready he began work on the top. It would be parquetry on a base of chipboard, with solid edges carved and mortised in. Since the beginning he had been carefully collecting all the sawdust, which would be mixed with glue and used between the parquetry blocks to fill minute gaps and irregularities.

Damned clever, Nome commented. But cheating. The right thing would be to cut the blocks so perfectly that no gaps remained to be filled.

Georges, bent over the plans, shrugged. It's wood, he said. It's imperfect.

So the argument began again. The object was to make a perfect table. But given imperfect materials, the best that could be achieved was the appearance of perfection. The question was, was a table with undetectable imperfections perfect, or not? Perfect to a stranger, perhaps, but to its builder, who knew the secret of its heart? Such questions, so piquant to Nome, seemed to run directly counter to Georges' way, and only annoyed him.

Nothing was happening. Georges was only staring at the plans.

The problem was that the parquetry blocks had to be jigsawed out of the available stock. A small heap of scribbled cutting diagrams accumulated on the work bench over a period of days. But at last the cutting began and the pattern materialized, slowly covering the piece of chipboard which sat on horses beside the saw. For weeks Georges tinkered with it, exasperating Nome — he shaved a bit here, a bit there, bringing the pattern into imperceptibly better alignment, symmetry, removing invisible warps and twists. But at last it was glued down, one small section at a time, each block mortared and tapped into place and put under clamps. Then it was done, and the edges mortised in, and it only remained to sand it, polish off the glue which glazed the pattern, obscuring it — slow work, because the grain ran in several directions. Nome went over it with his fingers, searching for flaws. There were none.

But Georges, he protested, I know there is something between those blocks which is not wood. I don't see how you can insist on the integrity of the piece.

Why don't you object to the chipboard, then?

Yes. Why do you permit it?

It's denser, less likely to warp.

Improved material, is that it? But nasty, ugly. Relegated to the strong heart of the piece.

Parquet work is all the same.

A dishonest sort of work, obviously. A bit like embezzlement. Georges, everything to do with this table is contaminated by pragmatism. You're playing both sides of the fence, Georges.

Georges' jaw set. Nome sighed and touched his shoulder, but he shook off Nome's hand and clumped out. Nome stared ruefully at the drifts of sawdust. Then he picked up a piece of sandpaper and began, lightly, to sand.

Georges had gone. Ciel, her calm disturbed, stood at the window looking out into the courtyard. Her attention was drawn to the lighted window in the opposite wing. Perhaps Georges was right. Nicola was too much on her own. Perhaps it wasn't safe ...

Henry was gone, too. Where? He was supposed to be on watch.

The forge was on fire. A dull, mahogany glow, hardly brighter than the night, suffused the courtyard. She opened the window. Yes, the heat on her face. Last night it was the same — the lighted forge, the faint heat on her bare skin as she stepped into the courtyard —

Georges was forging heavy shutter hinges. After William was in bed she went out to watch, to see how it was done. He was kneeling, stoking the fire when she stepped inside. He turned.

No. Go on. I just came to watch.

He worked the bellows. The fire flared up, spluttering him with light the color of blood. The forge roared, and Georges drew from it a glowing bar of iron which

he worked on the anvil, returning it to the fire now and then when it cooled. The hammer rose and fell in the red light and the ringing note of the anvil seemed to go through her neck like a wire. The heat was suffocating. In the unventilated shed Georges ran with sweat — it streamed in the curved gullies made by the bunching of his muscles; the hair of his chest glistened; drops sparked on the hot iron.

Then an ember jumped out onto his skin. He dropped the hammer and clawed at his back, cursing. She darted forward to help. The heat, the smell of hot iron and sweat slowed her, weighted her legs and hands. Her fingers brushed his back, his flesh hard as stone.

As she ran for the well pump in the center of the courtyard the forge exploded into flame, making her stagger. She reached the pump, frantically raised the handle and slammed it down again and again. Water spurted in her face as the makeshift hose fitting parted. She ran to get a bucket, which she filled and threw at the fire, but it was too hot to approach closely enough to be effective. At last, the empty bucket in her hand, she watched as the flames slithered over the walls of the forge and jumped off like burning frogs, as the wall of the adjoining workshop began to burn, with all the tools, with the commons table still unfinished.

Georges was behind her. Turning away from the fire, she buried her face in his chest, in the sweat-soaked mat of hair, against the muscles of cool stone. His arms closed on her with the crushing weight of rock and she sank down, far from the fire, deep into his ancient, sunless heart. Did he groan then — Nikki, damn you — or, creature of wood and stone, of the impassive changeless present, did he remain silent, hard, unmoved?

The steps go up to nowhere

Nome had gone up into the country. On his way he stopped for a time to prowl through the forty-some abandoned buildings surrounding the compound, mostly one-room shacks scattered like fallen apples. Here and there two or three stood in line, giving the appearance of a street to which one or another had turned its back, but a street which vanished among intersections when his viewpoint drifted a few feet farther on. Several paths had been worn between the buildings, which were otherwise grown up in fog-damp grass in which scraps of metal and broken boards lay hidden. Most of the doors were originally hung with strips of leather and the frames were vacant now, though here and there a plank door still swung in the wind on creaking iron hinges. Amongst these shacks he wandered, looking for signs of arson. Tufts of grass grew on the narrow ledges of crossbrace beams. Moonlight washed the color from powdery wood, from grass, from the tiny flowers embedded in the tangled mat. Windowless

shacks smelled of musty nests. Cats' eyes peered from the darkness; cats crouched in the grass, tails twitching. The air was full of small rustling, pattering sounds, of insect chirr and tiny squeaks.

A soft finger brushed his cheek. He shied and stumbled. A moth.

No sign of habitation caught his eye, or any sign of prowling spies. The beam of his pocket flashlight showed no disturbance of the compost of dirt and litter on the shack floors. Perhaps it was only the animals, the magnetism of warm breath and jeweled eyes, which gave him the sense of a presence, watchful and cautious.

Did he sense my presence then, my watchful regard? My hand, stretching out as through the refraction and obscurity of deep water, uncertainly feeling out the rusting objects scattered over the bottom, grazed him. There is some uncertainty principle of history, perhaps, that prevents too fine a scrutiny. An uncertainty of touch, of thick fingers poking into small places, blundering, disturbing one of the forest of chessmen on their squares, a card in the lower reaches of the tessellated heap, a leaf, the eddy of a breeze. Who? Whose touch?

Emerging from the compound, he skirted the exposed open hillside above the buildings and climbed up along a creek bed into the trees toward the crossing of the Kennebucto trail. Within the forest the feeling of close warmth enveloped him again, like a faint after-image of the sunwarmed day lingering in a protected place. He stopped to listen but the only sound was the wind, like breathing. He heard bare feet running on the path, not a sound but a beating in his stomach, and he spun about.

A rabbit sort of familiar, he thought, smiling to himself.

In a marshy swale up in the country was the village of Kennebucto, six tatterdemalion houses leaning against each other along the gravel track that rose up from the coastal highway, crowded through the swale and passed on upriver, deeper into the hills. Nome stayed within a fringe of trees and looked down into the open moonlight.

One house showed a lighted window. Keeping back in the darkness of the forest, feeling out each step in silence, darting low across the road, he circled the glade. Two of the houses appeared to be uninhabited — a refrigerator stood on the porch of one, blocking the door, and the steps had fallen away; the window-frames of the other were empty. But a white unpainted board, a new square of glass unbleared — the staring eyes of lived-in places marked one at least as occupied, with a single window lit, under the eave on the third story. A new four-wheel drive pickup stood among the twenty or so junk cars and trucks, the cast-off appliances, pieces of machinery and piles of boards and rusty wire that had collected at the bottom of the swale.

He waited, sitting with his back against a tree.

Now and then the figure of a man passed in front of the uncurtained window. It was a man in his twenties, perhaps, tall and bone-thin, naked to the waist. The angle prevented Nome from seeing directly into the third-floor room, and distance made it impossible to see his features clearly.

After midnight the sound of a truck in low gear separated itself from the wind and the creaking of branches. The sound grew, a grinding pulse that filled the glen. It was a Landrover, covered with mud, that appeared out of the trees and stopped on the road behind the pickup truck. Two men got out. In half an hour they returned, backed the Landrover around in the road, and drove off. The whining of the gearbox faded. The shirtless man appeared briefly again in the third-floor window. The light went out. An acoustic guitar sounded in the darkness and died, four bell-like notes.

He waited.

Something tickled his neck. His hand darted out and closed on a wrist — no, a branch. He smiled at his nervousness.

Then it was quiet.

A wind big enough to fly the kite came, eventually. The night before was crisp and still, as clear as glass, and in the morning the air was sharp, with a steady wind from the northwest. All the way down to the ferry at the foot of York Street Georges laughed and chattered; the car plunged drunkenly through traffic. By the time they embarked he had infected them all, and they giggled and staggered so bizarrely with their long brown-wrapped package that others on the ferry stared and nudged each other. On the beach Georges filled his lungs and ran whooping along the water, hair and clothes whipping in the wind.

It's a hurricane, Henry! Damn, it's cold. Blow, you devils. Blow!

Nome unwrapped the kite and unrolled it; already the wind pulled on it, snatching at it jealously. Nikki and Ciel held the spars while Georges inserted the cross-braces, and then fixed the bridle to the spar rings. In knotting the line to the bridle he fumbled — his fingers were numb. But he checked the knot and let it go, and the canvas crackled and it leaped overhead, struggling against him like a frightened animal, darting and weaving. Nome helped him wrestle it down. They re-knotted the bridle to change the angle of attack. Ciel and Nikki retreated to watch from a sheltered place.

The kite was ready. Nome threw it up and it shot into the air, rising fifty feet a second. The line burned Georges' hands.

Suddenly, out five hundred feet, the kite began to hunt wildly from side to side. Then it crumpled and fell like a stone. It slammed into the ground. The line came taut, snapped. The wind picked up the tatter of canvas and began to roll it down the beach.

Georges scrambled forward, waving his arms. Stop! he roared. Stop!

Nome, stunned, retreated to the shelter where Ciel and Nikki were huddled.

Nikki was pale.

What happened? Ciel asked.

I don't know, he said, rewinding line. Looked like it broke up in the air, didn't it?

The line snaked out over the slope of the beach, carving and erasing small rills of sand as Nome drew it in. He glanced at Nikki. She bit her lips and stared down the beach toward the tiny figure of Georges who was running into the water after the ruined kite.

At length Georges returned, his shoes and pants soaked. The canvas of the kite had become waterlogged, finally, and the wind had released it. Now it lay at their feet like a dog run over. Water dyed bright by the painted designs puddled beneath it. The four of them looked on in silence, shivering. Then Georges turned and trudged away in the direction of the ferry, and after a moment's hesitation Nikki ran to catch him. The two of them stopped and then went on again, heads down, her arm about his waist.

Henry had been about to follow, but Ciel held him back. He watched the others go, nodded toward the kite.

We should bury that. Georges won't like to see it.

Litter. Wrap it up — maybe we can find a place to throw it away before we get back to the ferry.

He knelt. It made smaller package than before.

Later there were recriminations. You let go of it too soon, Georges charged. He leaned over the ferry rail and stared at the water. Nikki had gone aft. You should have held onto it, he said.

What? The wind practically ripped it out of my hands. You payed out line too fast.

Too fast? Didn't you see it jumping? It practically committed suicide.

I was giving it line to keep it up.

If you had hauled in line it would have steadied. You never had it under control, Georges.

A box kite. Anybody can fly a box kite. What do you mean, not under control?

What did you want to make it so damned heavy for?

To make it big enough.

Thor's hammer, that's what. You're a city kid, Georges, fascinated by vast forces you don't understand.

What about you? You're always in a hurry — you think it's enough to understand something. You fiddle with it, figure out how it works, and throw it away. You don't care about the truth of it, you just use it up.

If you two weren't so much alike, Ciel broke in, you'd sure be different. Georges fell silent. A few drops of rain fell, and Nome looked up into the close, heavy sky. It was still early in the year. The rain would turn to sleet in the evening, perhaps.

In the autumn there were always a few days of driving sleet, too, which coated the windward wall of the workshop and varnished the jutting, blackened spars of the forge. Georges had installed a cast-iron wood stove

to heat the shop. It glowed a dry red and filled the room with the smell of burning oak and the tang of hot metal.

Burning the bones, Nome said. It was the scrap from the table he meant. The final sanding was done. Georges was putting on the first coat of sealer. The brush slapped wetly over the wood, transforming dusty wheat and rust to rich, glowing maize and coffee, the wood so vibrant and pure in tone it seemed to be translucent, lit from within. Five or six days would be needed to finish the varnishing, a week or so to cure it.

You never know what it's going to look like until you put the varnish on, Georges said. Then it's too late. He bent and squinted over the surface, looking for thin spots in the sealer.

Looks pretty good, Nome allowed.

Scratches are the thing. You think it's like glass — it feels like talc. Then when the first coat goes on it looks like a load of bricks got dragged over it.

Georges worked over the recesses of a carving, picking up some little puddles of sealer on the brush. At last he straightened and dropped the brush into a coffee can of paint thinner, closed the can of sealer and wiped his hands on the front of his shirt. For a long time, he and Nome stood side by side, looking at the work. The sealer, drying, began to dull.

It always looks better when it's wet, Georges said.

Too bad it won't stay wet.

Oh, the dust would stick on it, I suppose, wouldn't it?

Probably it would, grow dull with dust as well as anything else, covered with ashes and charred slivers of wood fallen from the rafters.

Heather is growing along the wall

One morning in early autumn Ciel went out to the shop where Georges was repairing storm windows and shutters. He had moved the saw horses out into the sunlight and stacked the windows against the shop wall. Seeing her, he bent assiduously over the work. Reglazing: kneading the white putty to softness in the warmth of his hand, thumbing it on, a long doughy curl peeling away under the knife as he smoothed it in place. Repainting: the white paint flowed from the brush like mayonnaise.

Where are the boys?

Nicola is watching them, she said, reading in his humped shoulders a desire to be left alone. His hand trembled and the straight line of paint veered onto the glass. He wiped it off. Again his hand slipped. Again he wiped the fresh paint away.

What did you want?

To see you.

Her open-eyed gaze caught him flat-footed when he looked up. Blood sprang along the back of his neck and he jabbed his brush into the joints of the window frame.

Where is Henry?

She was neglecting her duties, he meant, to Henry and the children. He wanted no confidences. Gone up to the old mine, I think, she said, innocently ignoring his meaning.

The mine? What for?

I don't know.

Has he told you what's on his mind?

Hasn't said, no. Haven't seen him to speak to.

Georges finished the first window and stood it against the wall, laid the second out on the horses and began to scrape off the flaking paint with his putty knife. Smugglers are getting some brass, he observed after a long silence. It was obvious she did not intend to go away.

Are they?

Bringing the stuff in by daylight. Ship just lays off shore — like picking up the laundry. Lot of damn brass.

It's a good place for smugglers, I suppose.

Banks got rich on it, sixty years ago. Fishermen would hide the liquor up in the old mine.

Nicola's grandfather smuggled whiskey, they say.

Didn't get much out of it, did he? Georges chopped irritably at the old stony putty. Nicola goes up to the mine nights, he grumbled.

Ciel excused her. There are snake dens. She likes to watch the snakes.

They come back to the dens after the sun sets.

What kind of snakes?

Black snakes, she says. King snakes, garter snakes. Harmless. She shouldn't go up there. She shouldn't go in.

No. She's promised me she won't go in.

Georges laid his paint brush across the mouth of the can. Ciel took a breath. Maybe I've given you the wrong impression, she began. You seem to think — I don't know how, maybe because of the way we live, so close. Maybe something I've said, about you or Henry, maybe something I've done has led you to think — Or maybe my taking care of the children the way I do has led you to think of me like — I don't want to make love with you, Georges. You should stop thinking of it. Are you very hurt?

But she had misjudged. His shocked face showed clearly that he had not thought of it until now. All unwilling, his eyes scratched over her bare stomach, her legs. Why had she worn these clothes? A violent pain gripped the base of her skull. In confusion, she attempted to apologize, but a stammer crept in and ruined it.

She fled.

Georges watched her run across the courtyard and into the commons, then took up his paint brush again. The bristles had grown a little dry and stiff. He worked it in the paint which streamed from the wedge of hair like thick cream.

He worked on with enforced calm. His wandering thoughts began to collect after a time on the memory of

the box kite he had built that spring in Toronto, collected on the memory like dust on wet varnish. It was the last time he and Nikki were together, happy. He was happy, at any rate.

It was something he had wanted to do for years, to fly some huge kite out over the lake, out so far over the water that it disappeared. And they had done it, from the harbor islands, just before Easter. The kite had gone up magnificently, ascending so dignified, so stately in the gale. It had taken all two thousand yards of line, so much line that the weight of it pulled the kite down again and the curve of it began to catch in the waves. The water pulled on it like a fish, jealously, enviously. The curve of the line was like a scratch on the sky, a pen-flourish on lead-blue paper that fades out into nothing.

They put up a shelter with blankets and driftwood and stayed there all morning, watching the sky. At last the weight of water on the line pulled it dangerously low and they brought the kite in. It took more than an hour, slowly reeling the line, recalling it, recalling the big kite from the other world. When it was overhead Georges reached up, grasped the bridle. Cold air flowed over him; his clenched hand on the bridle was numb. Then it was down, done.

They removed the cross-braces and rolled it, wrapped it again in brown paper. The wind tugged at the paper so that it took all four of them, laughing, their eyes streaming with windy tears, to control it. And returning on the ferry, faces burned, wind-deaf, they had yelled and hollered so that the other passengers stared, and Nome, staggering against the rail in stitches of laughter, nearly dropped the kite overboard.

Nome had gone down into the mine. His sense of an unseen companion had grown stronger — he sought where it lived. Underground he moved through the world as a worm, seeking heat. In the darkness of the mine he turned this way and that, as a snake would. The mine shaft ran laterally into the hillside, branched, opened sometimes into galleries. He penetrated deeper and deeper, into tunnels constricted by fallen timbers and collapsed earth, crawling on hands and knees to the abandoned workface, retreating again on his belly through passages choked with rubble and too narrow to turn around in.

But he had overestimated his power. He had difficulty keeping his bearings, and was reduced at last to memory and attention to the slope of the shaft. The air was stale and acrid. He panted, his jaw hanging, his mouth filled with the bitter tang of rock. He was lost.

Hours later, in a partly collapsed gallery, he traced a fitful cold cross-wind to a side passage which seemed by its smell to open to the outside. He stopped, feeling his heart slow as he breathed the fresher air that flowed along the wall. He turned his flashlight into the tunnel mouth but the hole swallowed his feeble beam. He moved forward cautiously, feeling out every step amid

loose earth and stones, exploring with his fingers the broken walls, the crevices, corrugated timbers soft with rot. He crept forward, crouching beneath the low roof.

Something blocked his path. He felt it as a pressure on the skin of his face, an eddy in the wind that covered the tunnel wall like a skin, before he was close enough to see it in the beam of his flashlight. There was an odor, too, which blossomed out of the smell of rock and earth. Wet cardboard. His light played on a row of boxes stacked up in the tunnel, mouldering. The lower cartons had burst like rotten pumpkins. The side of one box crumbled in his hand; inside was a gelatinous, unrecognizable mass. He recoiled, shuddering.

Sliding past this rotten stuff, he pressed forward up the passage. Again something blocked his path. Warm this time, musky. He froze. A drop of sweat trickled down his spine very slowly — a tickle, a knife-point. In darkness he let his hand slide out along the wall. Warm breath filled the passage. He advanced by inches. The heat swelled, flowing over him in waves, suffocating. Then it faded.

He pushed forward more rapidly, heedless of the muffled rattle of dislodged stones beneath his feet, of the wheezing of air in his throat. A crescent of gray light floated in the darkness ahead. For a moment it was blotted out, and then the creature was gone.

Nome scrambled out of the hole onto a bare, grassy hillside. Below lay the Kennebucto road, which climbed up through a valley on the other side of the ridge from the entrance to the mine. He had come completely through the hill. It was dusk.

The tunnel which had brought him out seemed to be an air shaft. The mouth of it was overgrown, invisible at a few yards distance, barely large enough to admit a man. It was plainly unused, forgotten.

The smell of musk lingered in his nostrils. A black bear, perhaps.

Where was it? In the fading light, Nome got slowly to his feet. Getting up on his hind legs, bearlike, nostrils flared to catch the scent of danger, swinging his head from side to side heavily, slowly. He smiled.

A gray chrysanthemum of smoke on a long, twisted stem was growing from somewhere farther up the valley. Thin smoke, rising from a strangled fire, from wet coals.

Now someone else would have to set a watch. Somewhere else the vigil would begin again, as sparks of vital fire float on the wind from place to place.

A hand has sprouted like a flower in the grass

In mid-afternoon Georges came into the kitchen where Ciel was preparing dinner. His boots were muddy, and he sat for a long time in the doorway cleaning them with a stick, meticulously scraping every speck of dirt from the welts, from between the lugs of the soles.

Fire up in Kennebucto, he said at last.

Ciel forced herself to continue calmly slicing vegetables. She could feel the last scraps of this way of life slipping, and felt as helpless as when William spilled his milk. She could see that he would spill it; she reached out futilely across the whole room — no!

Where are they boys? she inquired, to test her voice.

In the courtyard.

A bad fire?

Not too bad. Pumper came up from the village and got it out.

So there will be an investigation.

Georges was standing behind her, looking over her shoulder. The carrots were from the garden, brought in only an hour before. She shouldn't be peeling them — they would be more nutritious if she didn't. She had just gone on from turnips to carrots without thinking.

No, said Georges. The fire's not likely to trouble them considering what they found after they got it out.

She began to cry, quietly but uncontrollably, her shoulders quivering.

From behind, Georges enfolded her gently in his arms.

I don't believe they'll be troubling us now, he said.

His great hand cupped her breast, crushing it. The knife, she thought. The paring knife.

A knife scratched the table that winter, a scimitar curve, a sweeping streak with a little hook at the end. Georges filled the scar with varnish, carefully, with a toothpick and one of Nome's tiny photo retouching brushes. He polished it, but refraction still revealed it, like an embedded hair, ineradicable.

Damaged goods, that's all, Nome said, sipping his drink. It needs to be stripped and redone to get it out.

What a lot of work for a scratch you can't see without a map and a quartz lamp.

It's there.

Yes, it's there, maybe. What difference does it make?

A knife cut the kite free, too. It lay out two thousand yards over the lake, the merest speck. Georges doubled the line into a loop and cut it with the blade of a pocket knife. Slowly, the raw end of the line began to spread, unwind, blossom like a flower. Georges threw it down. It skittered over the beach like a crab and into the water and was gone. For a moment they looked into the empty sky. Then Georges smiled and turned back.

But the knife was not necessary. While she stood in the kitchen peeling vegetables for dinner, her eyes blinded by tears, he took her. She became enfolded in him, embedded in him like a garnet in schist. It was one still moment, and she felt a sudden warmth in the small of her back. When he released her she saw without turning the soft stain, and felt the dampness on her shirt. Without turning, she went on peeling vegetables. After a moment he stepped back and was gone.

The night before, alone, she had dreamed it all. It was why she had spoken to him, to prevent it.

Nome had gone out after dark. Below the compound he picked up the Kennebucto trail, intending to keep up his watch on the smugglers' presence on the river and then go over the mountain to have a look around Lac Morue.

The trail passed over a col behind L'Antre, two hundred twenty feet above the river, and then dropped down along the ridge that formed Point Fourchue. The mountain top stood a hundred twenty feet above the bare col, a quarter of a mile distant — a narrow outcrop of granite like an old galleon with a high taffrail. There was a trail junction here. A connecting trail went up over the mountain to join another coming up from the village which went around on the coastal side and ended at Lac Morue. Like all mountains, L'Antre created its own bad weather, seeming to draw the clouds down on itself like an old woman pulling on a stocking hat. The caves for which it was named were chiefly shallow niches high on the flat river-facing cliff, but one on the side overlooking the ocean was accessible and deep enough to provide shelter, and had been used off and on for centuries as a sentry post.

As he descended from the col into the trees the mountain slowly turned its port beam toward him. At the base of the rock, obscured first by the angle of view and then by the trees, Nome thought he saw the glimmer of a fire.

The upriver bank of Point Fourchue was a flat low-lying thumb of river silt. In the meadow near the base of the thumb a cabin stood, back against the forest. A long pier, twisted and warped where some of the pilings had rotted away, extended from the railed balcony of the cabin out over the meadow bog and into the river, where a dory was tied up. The cabin was dark. Inside, it was bare except for some cartons piled up in one room and a blackened kerosene lamp standing on top of the pile.

Retreating into the woods, he lay until long past midnight listening to the whispering of his familiar spirit, the unintelligible murmuring of trees and water, wind, night birds. But no one came down to the cabin. The next night the dory was gone. A mud-crust Lan-drover was parked in the narrow space between the back of the cabin and the trees. He went over it carefully. It was bare.

The trail over L'Antre passed behind the peak. On the rock above the trees the spirits yammered in the mist but there was no sign of habitation on this side of the mountain. Below, the head of Lac Morue lay between two arms of the mountain. What in daylight would be the vitreous ultramarine of the nearer, deeper end, becoming blue-gray and then brown at the outlet, was now a lightless black void, a coomb barely distinguishable from the virid black of the nightbound spruce forest above it. Slowly he descended, moving quietly,

sensing obstacles by the denser air that surrounds them, wrapped in his haunt like a cloak.

Another cabin stood here on an arm of the lake, its roof and one wall fallen into the stone-lined basement. The sixteenth century cod fishing fleets had stopped on this coast, when they could get over the Apohaqui bar, to dry their catch; their exploration of the back country had extended this far, where the remains of hunting encampments and artifacts for the dressing out of deer and rabbit could be found in the soil. The cabin's foundation was eighteenth century stonework; the cabin itself had been rebuilt again and again. There were dibs on the spot. There was a feeling of unseen life there, without cats' eyes or the warm smell of mice to justify it. The sense of the past in this place made the hair on his neck prick, as if it was haunted by the spirits of spirits, malevolent ancestors of his own familiar, which was irritated by them like a ball of wool that puffs itself up and hisses at electricity in the air. He retreated.

At dawn, from a trail on the mountainside, he looked out on the ocean.

A freighter lay to off the coast, a tiny angular speck on the horizon, and the dory was on its way. The ship had sent a launch out to meet it. They were three black specks against the great dawn sun, into which he squinted as into a profound mystery.

It was evening again by the time he finished his search of the mine and had checked his watch on the cabin on Point Fourchue. It was nearly dark when he reached the trail junction on the shoulder of L'Antre. In the last light he scrambled up to the base of the peak, a cliff which was the stern of a fanciful stone galleon riding a spruce-tree ocean. The night was clear. There would be a moon later.

Working his way along the edge of the rock he emerged from the protection of the cliff onto its ocean-facing side. The wind, springing up at sunset off the port bow, was beginning to come around to landward and by moonrise this would be the lee side of the mountain. He reached the cave in about an hour.

There was a grassy apron here, a parapet a few yards wide that plunged at the far edge into the treetops. His view of the ocean and the coastline was unimpeded. It was no wonder the Micmacs, the French, the English had all used it, that Wolfe and Amherst had posted a watch here in 1758. Watches were kept here in all the great wars — in 1794 when eastern Canada lay in danger of being cut off by an American drive toward Quebec, in the naval campaign of 1812, in 1916 and again in 1943 —

Nome stirred uneasily from the spot where he had been sitting and got up to examine the ashes of a signal fire built in the mouth of the cave. He was short of breath, as if the climb had more than winded him. Perhaps it was that he had eaten nothing since morning. His vision blurred momentarily. Something passed in

front of him and he raised his hand as if brushing away spiderwebs.

But after a time the weakness left him. He returned to the watch and sat down. The river, the smugglers' cabin, the village, the coast and the great nightbound ocean were spread below him, quiet, shadowed deep. Can you see the future from there, Henry Nome? Does that place give you so wide a vista? Can you see from there what you have wrought, what you have bequeathed me, you and your kind? Can you see the rain and heat, the white shirts and brown faces, the bodies which fall slowly after small explosions in the silent afternoons? Can you see fog and wet stones, the rough texture of a broken loaf of bread, the shyness of a candle flame? Can you see the wind, the flow of yellow dust over hard ground on a dry, sunblind afternoon? Can you hear the wings of pigeons, the hiss of rain, footsteps — on concrete, on sand, on wet leaves?

Feeling a dull pain in his chest, he got to his knees. A great weight descended on his shoulders and would not let him rise. On all fours before the mouth of the cave, eyes bulged, struggling for breath, he waited.

Can you feel the clumsy weight of my finger, Henry Nome? Can you hear my voice? I cry out. My father did once, excusing his only attack of conscience as a blood weakness, unwanted inheritance. My grandfather bayed at the moon once too, perhaps, in anguish at the extinction of youth and love. Your son will cry out, Henry Nome. Everyone is permitted this, once, in pain or joy. When did you? It is not recorded — did you waste it? My voice is faint and distant to you, perhaps no more than a breath of wind, but I dance on your grave.

Something was tickling the back of his neck but he could not raise a hand to brush it away. A raccoon emerged from the trees and stopped in the open several yards away. Seeing that Nome remained still, it ambled across the ledge and descended again into the trees on the other side. His lips formed an O, a soundless plea, but the animal paid no heed. He lifted one hand and collapsed onto the ground, a leg twisted beneath him.

Hours passed. Then his outstretched hand clawed a furrow in the thin grass, exposing the rock beneath. He lay still. The wind, too, had died. Later, the moon rose, and after it the sun.

The shadows lie in every direction like straws atop one another

Georges' hand was bound with gauze. He could not keep from clenching it, disbelieving the wound; this stretched the skin and reopened the cut, which then had to be rebound. His left hand. He sat up nursing it all night to keep his mind from other things. Nicola came in at supper time and knew immediately what had happened. She was too precocious. Cynical.

In the morning a search party was gotten up. They found Nome on L'Antre, shot to death. Perhaps he had

surprised the smugglers' sentry. Or perhaps he had pursued them too closely after the Kennebucto fire. Knowing that he had pursued them for weeks, perhaps they held him responsible for the fire and murdered him in revenge before they fled.

So Georges was left alone with the two children. He would have to go back to Toronto, of course, where there was work.

You want to go back to your mother, maybe, he said to Nicola.

No.

A long silence followed. For a child, she could sit uncannily still. Maybe you won't like it.

She looked at him bluntly, her head cocked, a little sardonic smile at the corner of her mouth.

We'll get along all right, she said.

The Gorgon sun casts no light

The Gorgon sun casts no light.

CLAY

Her uncle Stephen had persuaded her to visit some cousins of her mother's, an old woman and her son, and Jo had returned incredulous, her eyes red with amusement. Who are these people? she demanded to know.

Henry Birk Haap, her uncle began, setting down his coffee cup, is the product of a liaison between Stephanie and your maternal grandfather.

A bastard uncle, then,

Your grandfather Stefan Centobie inherited the relationship from his brother Thomas, when Thomas was killed. They were all cousins on both sides, you know, the Haaps and Centobies.

Jo pinched the bridge of her nose with irritation as the initial clarity of the relationship began to dissolve like greenware in water. It was, perhaps, impossible to say just who they were?

It was Henry Birk who had opened the door to her — a pale, fragile old man with an enormous aureole of delicate white hair. Upon seeing her he had nodded, almost a bow, and called out in a high, childlike voice —

Miss Coudres!

Pivoting neatly on one glistening black shoe, he invited her to enter, and led her through the house to the back, where a sitting room opened off the kitchen.

Go in please. Go in.

The room was filled with plants. In one wall was a glass door leading to an enclosed patio, also filled with plants. Mirrors hid behind the leaves, so that the room appeared much larger than it was, with false aisles of foliage on all sides. Much later she realized that it was sealed, a reverberant, hermetic, artificial jungle.

I thought you would leave without coming here, said a voice. It was necessary to speak to your uncle.

The huge ragged leaves of a vine were pushed aside by an old woman's hand. This was Stephanie, who was likewise very small, with hair the color of wood curls. She wore a shirt and trousers made of something like weathered gray-green canvas and she sat very still in a big chair, one hand resting on the upholstered arm. Her

tiny eyes, such a washed-out blue as to be nearly colorless, were fixed intently on Jo.

You don't look much like your mother, do you?

Stephanie's voice was phlegmy and sharp, unlike her son's dry, flutelike speech.

I'm told you have a genealogical interest.

I?

Yes. Your brother has poisoned himself, I hear. I'm not surprised. I would advise you to dispose of everything. You have inherited a midden, the consequence of living too long in one place. It is essential for the health of future generations that it be scattered, dispersed, permitted to decompose. Pfui!

The old woman waved her hand before her face, brushing away imaginary spiderwebs. She pushed aside some other leaves of the same gnarled vine that had first hidden her — Jo had not thought such a plant would grow indoors. There were palms and everyday rhododendrons, and many ferns with long arching fronds growing on the floor, and more vines and ferns on shelves, and growing along the walls, and hanging from the ceiling. The two old people sat half-hidden like two macaques, which they resembled.

From their talk the past emerged in bits like rumors. Both of them talked at once; their two voices, soft and sharp, mixed in a grave pavane, two voices hidden in the leaves. Then abruptly the old woman fixed Jo with a suspicious stare like a squirrel — frozen, head cocked — then she flicked at the air with her fingers, cackled, and went on talking. Jo shifted uneasily on her alien chair. A leaf slapped over her face like a hand. She pushed it back.

Jigging, her mother had called it, this squirming on hard chairs. In church she would pinch Jo's arm surreptitiously and, bending her head very slightly, keeping her eyes on the pulpit, she would whisper fiercely.

Will you stop that?

Her fingers left livid marks on Jo's bare arm. Now Stephanie broke off and fixed her with the same kind of stare — rigid, her attention all in the rims of her eyes — as Jo's mother had kept on the pulpit. Then the old

woman's cackle erupted again. This noise, so disconcerting at first, was repeated so perfectly each time that it plainly meant nothing. Perhaps in her youth she had cultivated a light and purling laugh and had been betrayed. It was a noise like ten peanuts dropped into an empty can — always ten, the same ten, one after another. And the two voices began again, interlaid like fingers.

Henrik was born on the plains, you know. It was unusual for him to have come East. A retrograde motion. Well, she was a Virginian. Not born so, of course. In the nineties. Stefan had married a Sundgaard — her maiden name, she had been married before. She could not have been more than twenty the first time. Stefan and Henrik were very close, you see. Naturally the children saw a great deal of each other. I believe Tomas was the one who proposed it. It was after Thomas Morgan was born that they fell out. My father was jealous of Tomas, you see. He was jealous of his son, yes. They were married nine years then. Per Henrik was twelve.

No, he was run over. My father took it very hard. At last he shot himself. He was angry with Tomas and his sister — yes, he shot her too. He blamed her, blamed her for not being *his* sister. He would have been happier if he had married his sister instead. Thomas and I were quite close. We had always been close, of course. He died the next year, and his brother Stefan also, but much later. He and his wife and the two children, the two younger children. Your mother was not with them, of course. We were no longer intimate at that time. There was his family to think of. He was fifty-two, I believe. Yes, fifty-two. Air travel was not frequent even then, but he insisted on going. The plane exploded. I never felt for Stefan as I did for Thomas, even though they were brothers. It was youth, perhaps. If Per had lived — oh yes, Birk knew all the time, didn't you? Who your father was? Yes, we were very close. It all stems from that, of course. Perhaps if Henrik's marriage had been fruitful. But he was very close to his sister Ulla all the same. It was there underneath, waiting. If Per Henrik had lived, perhaps. He had wanted a family, and blamed her, and looked jealously on Ulla's children. Tomas lived only four years more. It was long enough to outlive his son, unfortunately. Only Ulla survived. He worked in the reactor. Thomas did, yes. Radiation poisoning. His father died soon after. Morgan Anna was his first grandchild, but it didn't give him any pleasure. Hilary was aware of it, certainly. Your grandmother. It was broken off for her sake. Nome, yes — her maiden name was Nome. I was twenty-five when he died. It affected me very oddly. I have had a superstitious horror of travel. It was well your grandmother Hilary died with him; I don't know how I would have faced her. Stefan and Thomas were very much alike, it was said. If Per had not lived, perhaps. If the boy had died at birth Henrik might not have been so despondent later. One comes to have expectations. Yes,

it affected her quite strongly, didn't it? When your brother died? She was thirteen, an impressionable age. It was after that she and Thomas became so close.

Her mind wandered. How many ancestors does one have, she wondered. They multiply like mushrooms in the darkness of the past and spring up suddenly, in an ever-widening circle. To understand them all is a task of the dimensions of the universe. To hear their phantom voices is to listen to oneself, the sound propagated through space-time like a voice in a whispering gallery, returning again and again.

Now here were some more of them, these Haaps and Centobies and their fetid, airless passions.

No more, no more. They are all clay; they lie in the ground like layers and pockets of clay. White kaolin in little deposits with feldspar and quartz, beds of dark gray ball clay layered with coal and lensed with carbon, fire clay, sagger clay, stoneware clay and red earthenware clay, adobe, flint, shale, volcanic bentonite, terra cotta, bauxite, gumbo — plastic or not, refractory or not, with sand in it, crushed rock, grog, red with iron or purest white — or not —

No more. Clay minerals comprise eighty percent of the earth's crust — the world is mostly clay. Complex, amorphous, plastic, indeterminate, slippery clay. Ask the potter for advice, for help from his molds and jiggers. History is the slip-mold of reality, bringing form to clay with false promises, vain hopes, lies and pretenses. History is the jigger of reality, embracing it with its ideological scraper. The historian, utopian dreamer, embraces life, dirties himself with it, spatters himself with mud. At that moment, flushed with victory, he feels the hot breath of the kiln. Now it is only a matter of time.

The kiln is fired, cooled. From it emerges a long procession of dead forms, failed schemes. One's ancestors, gaily decorated.

Slowly these empty pots and jugs pass on the racks of the kiln car. Porcelain, raku ware, tiles, sewer pipe — used, broken, discarded, buried. Only I remain. And not even I, but only my voice, which is all there ever was in any case — my voice, this noise.

After all this the original question remains, will remain: *What noise is this?* Who is making this racket?

Who?