Confessions

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Abstract

Confessions is a series of four short stories, each written in the first person, each involving a narrator's confession of his or her thoughts and actions. The title "Confessions" implies that in the telling of these stories, the narrators hope to be 'absolved' of their actions, and change or escape the situation which defines their worlds.

Structurally, all four stories share not only narrative point of view, but also a certain pattern. Each story begins with a narrator explaining a problem in his or her life, and then unfolds to encompass some past experience which suggests a framework for understanding the present dilemma.

Family figures strongly in all of the stories. For all the narrators, there is a strained combination of present distance and past personal experience involving family members. The alienation of the present prevents even the the possibility of reconciliation with parent or brother.

The source or truth of these problems is never completely revealed. The narrator often finds him or herself in a an even more constrained position at the end of the stories then at the beginning. But at the conclusion of each story there is a note of acceptance, despite the sometimes bizarre situations the narrators find themselves in. If there is one common theme running throughout the collection it would be: in our lives, we often accept the most punishing of roles.

The title **Confessions** also refers to the process employed in writing these stories. The development and fate of the various narrators evolved over time. This collection represents the culmination of many drafts. As I progressed, I felt as if I was employed in a kind of analysis, in which the narrators gradually began to give up some (but not all), of their secrets.

Contents

The Baths

I push at the rough surface above my body, and realize it is the bottom of a bath. It has fallen in on me from upstairs, my brother's apartment, pushing me down beneath the surface of my own bath. My toes search for, and then try to undo the plug, to let the water out that is drowning me.

A few moments ago, I heard a vague creaking sound from up above — not the usual sounds of Sylvain's heavy steps — but something like a long sigh, an old man's breathing. Then there was a crash and a scream (my scream?), a cloud of white plaster, and the falling shape that now pins me down.

When you're drowning, time stands still. I struggle in the dark (I keep my eyes tightly shut), holding my breath for what seems like hours. I can hear sounds coming from the room around me. I picture what I'd see if a thin weightless part of me could slip out and float around the room. Steam and a spray of hot water fan up overhead. The pipes, pulled out of the wall, are severed and point upwards towards the sky like the rifle barrels of hidden hunters. Beads of water move across the ceramic tiles, the medicine cabinet mirror and the plasticized print of Monet's Waterlillies. Like tiny jewels, they cling as well to the bath that sits atop my bath.

I used to be able to do this, separate a part of my self, an invisible part, and float around outside. But I wouldn't be able to do it on my own. I would always be with Sylvain, clinging to his shoulders or the handle bars of his bike.

It helps now, in my present predicament, to think of one of those times, flying along with Sylvain on his bike. My lungs fill with air. I hang onto his shoulders and float behind, an unseen banner in the wind. Then I pull myself forward and sit perched in front of him on the handle bars, staring back at him. Sylvain just rides along, looking right through me. And what I see of Sylvain isn't quite real either. To me, he is wearing

a yellow plaid short-sleeved shirt, undone and flapping at his sides. He also has loose blue shorts and brand-new white running shoes. I picture him as a child.

But Sylvain is an adult now. On every good day in the summer, he rides his 12-speed hybrid along the paths near the canal that lead him to his job at one of Montreal's big French hospitals. He takes a bath in cool water before leaving, barely drying himself, so as to keep from getting over-heated before work. He shivers as he goes out the door in bicycle pants and a t-shirt. Everything clings.

On one such day, I caught him coming down our common stairwell. I wondered at his get-up, embarrassed by all the various bulges.

"Est-ce que tu es en training pour les olympiques?" I asked.

"It's better for riding." He answered me in English, another unpleasant surprise. He's always thrown a lot of English into his speech, a kind of joke, an affectation. But now, I was convinced it was something he hid behind, like the big black moustache that covered a good part of his face. He was hiding the younger brother who moved into this building with me only a few years ago. It used to be that the stairway was constantly being used. One or the other of us would either be going up or coming down, making of the two flats one house, recreating the family home back in Joliette. Lately though, I felt unwelcome in his apartment. If ever I walked in on him, he looked up, not angrily, but with that even, unconcerned look of his that seemed to say, 'Not that I care, but what is it this time?' He'd always had that side to him, that look of the little prince. Now it was worse. It seemed these days as if he looked at everything in the same way —from picking up a bargain at the Club Price store, to seeing cousin Joseline's new baby last Christmas.

There were seven children in the Rousseau family, and I was dead-center. As a baby, I was often taken care of by one of my older sisters. We were a combination of a traditional French-Canadian rural family and a modern one — lots of kids, but needing two

incomes. My father spent his time working the farm, while my mother worked at the big hospital in town, an occupation Sylvain seems to have inherited.

By the time I was nine or ten, since there weren't any more girls being born, I was given the job of taking care of Sylvain, the youngest. It was supposed that the girls liked the idea of taking care of a baby — being like a grown-up, playing a mother's role. Of course, I, at first, resented it. My treatment of Sylvain was often neglectful, sometimes dangerous. I'd often leave him unattended in the stroller by the road in front of the house. Once, I'd left him out in the back yard in the rain until mother heard his cries. I was punished for this. Every third year, one of us got to have his or her own bedroom. This privilege was coming up for me on my birthday. With all those people in the house, it was a very big deal. This time, though, I lost it, and would have to wait till next year. It was like something essential to myself, my very identity was being disallowed. After this, I became much more attentive to Sylvain. Not, as my mother thought, because of this punishment, but because, in my mind, Sylvain had to be either an enemy or an ally; it made me feel stronger to have him on my side.

In giving me this job, my parents had unwittingly marked and separated us from the other boys. Being Sylvain's nursemaid absolved me from the drudgery of farm chores. As if by association, this exemption was transferred as well onto Sylvain, even when he was old enough to pitch in himself. Because of this, despite our age difference, we stuck with each other. We tended to stay in and around the house, rarely working outside. Although mother was often absent, especially when she was younger and worked regularly, her world was more familiar to us than father's. The only thing that linked us to him was our one responsibility of bringing food out to him in the fields at lunch time. We would prepare a panier with sandwiches, fruit, and some kind of dessert — pie or a couple of pieces of 'trottoir'. Everything would be neatly separated and carefully wrapped in wax paper. I would carry it and Sylvain would run along beside me with the thermos of fresh coffee. And there the old man would be, alone on top of his tractor out

in the middle of the field. We'd see his hair from a distance — prematurely white and unkempt — blowing around crazily in the wind. Sitting high above the muddy wheels, he would gruffly take the panier of food from our outstretched hands. Then he'd hand down the empty thermos from the morning coffee. Sylvain was the bearer of these shiny steel cylinders, constantly being filled, emptied, refilled and emptied again of their hot liquid contents.

Whenever Sylvain left for Hopital St. Luc, my invisible self fluttered along with him, following him like a cloud through his eight hour shift. He was quite anonymous there in his uniform, the way all hospitals make people anonymous. He was just one of an army of men and women who worked there. All day long he lifted immobile patients to transport them, or bathe them in their beds — turning them over and over, sponging down dry white skin. It was rigorous, unending physical labour. And yet, Sylvain never tired. In fact, he seemed to gain energy from his work.

He had one favorite patient — a very old man who didn't speak, but just looked up, watching Sylvain in a special way, his eyes like small polished pebbles. Here at the end of his days, it seemed the man needed someone, and Sylvain was the only one he had regular contact with. Like many elderly patients, his family was gone or didn't care. I couldn't help thinking of our own family — all those people scattered around now, barely keeping contact. The way Sylvain worked in the old man's room, turning down the sheets just so, also reminded me of home. The neatly folded sheets covering the old man were like the wax paper-covered sandwiches prepared for my father. But there was a kind of reverse nourishment going on here. Little by little, the old man was disappearing, wasting away. Although Sylvain tried to be careful and helpful, he seemed like a vampire, drawing away the last of the old man's life forces.

At the end of the day, fired up by this strange energy, Sylvain pedalled back along the bike paths at top speed. Upon arriving home, he ran up the stairs, allowing the

bike, hanging on his shoulder, to bang against the railing and walls, chipping the paint and plaster. It was almost frightening, this energy. My invisible self was barely able to hang on. There was a scene I once saw on a nature program with Jacques Cousteau that reminded me of Sylvain and myself. It was of a shark who had caught an octopus in its jaws, and was shaking it back and forth. Although the octopus didn't stand a chance, it expelled its ink, and tried ineffectually to pry open the shark's mouth with its tentacles. There was an odd gentleness in the way the octopus touched the shark, the opposite of the shark's tearing violence. The octopus remained so calm and methodical, it appeared at last as if it was the shark that was struggling to extricate itself. I wondered if Sylvain sensed in some indistinct way my presence hanging on to him, if his running and frantic movements were really efforts to escape me.

My real self, my material self which always stayed at home, heard Sylvain come barreling up the stairs. I pictured a red face with narrow, angry eyes, as when he was a child and would have one of his tantrums. But he was never like that. When I poked my head out my door, I saw his usual pale face, and not a drop of sweat. I wanted to follow him up the stairs, but I knew he wouldn't appreciate that. Anyway, he usually headed straight for his after-work bath. I could hear the water running, and then, if I stood quietly in my own bathroom, I could hear his movements in the tub. His body was a closed wall of skin, a geography of muscle, fat and heavy bone. His waist was wider than his chest. His hands, calloused from his work, rested open on his thighs, and framed the short, wide penis which broke the surface of the bath water like the bud of a pink waterlily.

Unlike my own small modern bath, Sylvain's was the old kind: smooth, white porcelain-covered iron with a textured exterior created by years and layers of thick white oil paint. The feet of the bath were eagle claws each gripping small white cannon balls. The floor dipped under the weight of each foot, where little pools formed when water was spilt. Looking up at my bathroom ceiling, I could see the impression of these

lumps and bumps. Sylvain, however, had a skylight to look through. He looked up, staring at the sky above him, above the building. He stared in that even, unconcerned way of his that so infuriated me. If a cloud, or perhaps a sea gull, entered the view of the skylight, his head shifted an inch, then another inch, following its progress. Somehow, this tiny movement utterly undid the effect of his heavy male form. He was still a spoilt child with his attention constantly being drawn here or there. When he was under my charge, he was like this. From his stroller, or sitting on a blanket on the ground, he would watch me, as if whatever I did was directly meant for his entertainment, as if I existed just for him.

He stretched out now, immersing his knees in the water, which was beginning to cool off. His bath, larger than mine, allowed him this luxury. The light coming in from above was turning pink. The bathroom dimmed, taking on the glow of twilight. I noticed it too, and went to my bathroom window, which was just the right size and height to frame my head and shoulders. From outside, I would appear as a disembodied round face of undetermined age — either young or approaching middle age — disappearing minute by minute in the fading light.

There was a window just like it in the bathroom of my parents' house. It was in about the same place as this one, above the sink, which as a child I would have to climb up on to to look outside. Our house was surrounded by trees, and the bathroom, being on the top floor, felt like it was up in a tree house.

As with everything else, I used to have to take baby Sylvain to the toilet. Rather than balancing him on the edge of the toilet seat, I would make him go in mother's old porcelain pitcher, which was there really just as a decoration. First I'd half fill it with water, then crouch him over it. Afterwards, I'd climb up onto the sink to my spot at the window and pour the contents outside. It would fall far to the ground, and land amid mother's purple irises. I would wait a while before going outside, so as not to attract attention or create a link between our visit to the bathroom and leaving the house (as if

anyone followed our actions that closely). Then I would take the trowel Mother used for her plants, and bury what I'd dropped there. I liked it because it was something done solely by myself, or rather, by us. No one else would know about it.

Apart from the bathroom, we had other secret places. In the back of closets, the two of us would sit amid the pushed-back hanging clothes. I would light a piece of candle stolen from one of the kitchen drawers. We would become a fire hazard there, unknown, unmonitored, allowing the paraffin smell to mingle with that of the mothballs Mother or our older sisters put in all the closets and drawers.

I discovered, as well, several empty trunks in the old, unused barn, which also made good homes. They were lined with floral wallpaper which made them like miniature rooms. But I think it was the dampness stains that really attracted me. I imagined them to be someone else's forgotten accidents, spillages. They were like odorous secrets that when touched became imprinted on us, our own. I would haul the boxes to the very edge of the yard, to an untilled, unplanted section that was a dump for wind-fallen branches, and pieces of discarded lumber. I felt I was claiming the area, stepping out on my own. I'd turn the trunks up on one end, open them up like doll houses, and Sylvain and I would each have one to sit inside.

Sylvain's bath water turned pink from the twilight. It was like warm amniotic fluid, and the walls of the bath seemed to contract, pushing him out onto the floor. "Faut que je sorte," he said. He put his riding gear back on. I heard the draining, sucking sounds of his bath emptying, then the familiar clang and stomp of Sylvain and his bike in the stairwell.

He was soon back on his bike, following, slowly this time, the paths along the canal. He didn't have a particular destination, but just rode along watching the diminishing orange line of light at the bottom of the sky, showing up here and there between all the buildings. It was nine-thirty, one of the longest evenings of the year and one of

the first that didn't cool down after the heat of the day. Sylvain's body must have felt like it was the same temperature as the air. If he had dipped his finger into the canal, he wouldn't have been able to tell where the air ended and the water began.

He stopped riding, and leaned with his bike against the rail near the water. He felt, we felt (I was with him too), that something was going to happen here. He made that familiar movement of his head, as he watched other cyclists passing by, each holding a split second of interest for him.

Soon, a figure appeared some distance away, also standing by the rail. Perhaps it was someone who had been there all along, unnoticed in the fuzzy light. Sylvain turned to look, then turned away again. When he looked back, the man was closer, but it wasn't clear which of them moved. For the moment, Sylvain and this other man mirrored each other: black pants and white skin in the same proportions. It was only when they were beside each other that the differences became apparent. Though dressed almost identically to Sylvain, he was a very old man. I was reminded of the old man in the hospital— Sylvain's favorite patient.

That part of me that was here to witness this was only a thin slice, a two-dimensional cut-out that floated just behind Sylvain's shoulders. From here, I could look down at the top of his head, while Sylvain looked down at the man who now had knelt or collapsed in front of us — either out of desire or exhaustion. Ancient fingers gripped and peeled back the tight lycra. The head was there in front of him, in front of us. I half-expected Sylvain to twitch, to jump out of the way, but he didn't. Instead, he touched the hair, white and glowing in the twilight, a little long and wild like old uncut grass.

My weightless presence rippled with the rush of response within Sylvain, and we both shivered afterwards as the body finally pulled away from in front of us. I wondered at what had happened, at what could have been the attraction here. Sylvain wasn't consciously aware of me, but I caused something to form inside him: a kind of question

mark, coiled up, taking up space in his stomach and abdomen. It made him quickly cover up, jump on his bike, and ride away. He pounded the pedals in high gear towards home, but I still hung on, like a cape flapping in the wind.

I finally dislodge the plug with my toes, and feel the surface line of water ebb around me. I dare to open my eyes, and realize I'm not in utter darkness. There is a little light coming in through the cracks where Sylvain's bath sits over mine. All I can do is think; and so I think about this one scene by the canal. It's as when a thought occurs to you just as you're waking up, or perhaps going to sleep, something important that you forgot to do, something that will rouse you out of bed in the morning or make you lie awake half the night. In my present predicament I have no choice but to lie in the same position. Why, I wonder, would Sylvain and I (after all, I was there too), allow ourselves to be touched in this way by this old man? Where did he come from in our story? Our world is so small, populated by so few, the only other old man we know is our father, and that is just a memory — him sitting on his tractor as we march slowly towards him across the flat fields.

Perhaps, since coming to Montreal, I've failed in my job of taking care of Sylvain. When we first arrived here, I was the one in control; as I'd always been. Our relationship from childhood continued. Sylvain had just turned eighteen. I was twenty-seven, but we were both about equal in our naivete. Both of us, until that point, had been still living at home on the farm. My function had turned from baby sitter to nurse, taking care of my sick mother, serving up hot soup, emptying bed pans, perhaps a repayment for the times I'd jettisoned Sylvain's out the bathroom window. With her death and the sale of the farm, I was, we were, free to go. Sylvain was primed and ready — ready to flower. I would be the roots. I would get a job — a real city job, an office job. But then something happened to make me lose all confidence. I went from being unemployed to unemployable.

It wasn't an act of violence or the scariness of the city that so discouraged me, but a feeling that grew out of a comment a stranger made one day on the Métro. A man followed Sylvain and me on to one of the trains. Actually, I hadn't really noticed anything. I was too busy consulting my city map and checking for our stop. It was Sylvain who leaned over to me and whispered it into my ear. He said that a man had boarded the train, and was watching us. When we got off to change trains, I wanted to test the situation, to show Sylvain he was probably just imagining it. I told him that our exit would be at the other end of the station. But sure enough, after we moved down to the other end of the platform, I did notice that the man Sylvain had pointed out soon appeared near us again. He was tall and pale, not very menacing. He wore nice clothes, not just nice clothes, but different clothes. Stylish. I didn't feel at all nervous of this city boy, and thought I'd give him a little shock.

"Est-ce que tu nous suis?" I asked. point blank.

He looked at me for a moment, then a thin-lipped, almost mean-looking smile came over his face. "Viens-tu de Joliette?," he asked, with a kind of guttural sound on the 'J'. I only realized afterwards he was mocking my accent.

"Oui, oui, on est de Joliette," I said, gesturing to include Sylvain. I was relieved and happily surprised to think I was meeting someone from home. Sylvain just watched, unwilling to get involved. He moved slightly, only a tiny step backwards, but it was this that I noticed more than anything else.

"Non," the young man said. "C'est juste parce que tu t'habille comme la chienne à Jacques."

'I dress like Jacques'dog', a real old-style Québecois expression, and for me, a double-barreled insult. For one thing, it meant I was a farmer; he could see that as clearly as if I had a sign hanging around my neck. But also, 'la chienne' is female. He'd pinpointed something, the thing that had always marked me on the farm with my brothers and their friends, the thing that had set me apart ever since I'd started taking

care of Sylvain. With this guy though, there was a kind of mean complicity. For some reason I pictured one of the paintings in the church at Joliette — the angel who appears to tell the Virgin she will soon bear God's child. I'd always thought that whoever did that painting gave the angel a strange look — smiling, but with a certain nastiness, like a prankster.

Then, just as quickly, the man turned on his heels and took off. I looked at Sylvain, and I think I may have said something like, 'that's the type you find in the big city'. Sylvain just made a face — a kind of shrug and grin at the same time. It hurt me, this look, because it seemed to impart some complicity with this guy. Also, it was such a different look for Sylvain. There was a real effort to exclude me, or rather exclude himself from something that, I thought, was happening to both of us.

We continued on our way to where we were going — job interviews —or rather, a job placement office. We quietly filled out our forms, sitting side by side at adjoining white tables. As I wrote, I felt a new kind of awkwardness open up within me, as real as some physical scar or disease. It was like some disfiguring birthmark, bright and pink that danced over my skin, but rather than attracting attention, it was something that made me less noticeable. I felt disguised, unwillingly camouflaged.

Soon afterwards, I stopped going to these fruitless interviews. Sylvain, however, continued and found his job at the hospital. My visit to the Welfare office was one of the last trips I made by myself from home. There I saw the kind of people whom I'd always thought were of another level, 'un autre monde'. I felt as if I was visiting some institution, an emergency ward, or chronic care hospital. I heard the way the woman in front of me was addressed by the receptionist — the not so subtle hints that she was lazy and that she was being done a big favour by the government. When it was my turn, I wanted to say that I wasn't there for myself, that I was representing someone else. But I had to go through with it, and endure the same condescending tone.

From then on, I began to depend more and more on Sylvain. I asked him to

accompany me grocery shopping. Then, after he got his job at the hospital, he would often shop for both of us on the way home. He did this diligently almost dotingly. Once a week, on his pay day, he'd pick up a bouquet of freshly cut flowers from the market, which he wouldn't divvy up; they were just for my apartment. I hardly needed to leave the house at all. I told myself Sylvain was paying me back for all the years I'd taken care of him.

My unwillingness to leave the building grew into a real phobia. I felt like that octopus in the Jacques Cousteau story, hiding in an underwater cave, soft, vulnerable and ugly. It was then that, quite outside my control, a part of myself split off, and became the thin layer that tied itself to and accompanied Sylvain.

I was woken up by the sound of running water. Sylvain was taking another bath. I'd been sitting in the bathroom daydreaming, drifting off. My real self, the part of me that stays in the apartment, was only vaguely aware of what hadhappened earlier in the evening down by the canal. As with Sylvain, I now had this coiled question mark inside me, hidden but as real as any other internal organ. I could feel it trying to make room for itself as I stood up, as if a weight was shifting inside me.

A dripping sound — much closer to me than the sound of Sylvain's bath — made me look up. I turned on the light. Blinking in the sudden brightness, I noticed long, thin brown lines running down the walls, branching out from the ceiling. At first, I couldn't tell what they were. They looked like faint shadows of bare trees, or children's drawings, scribbles. Still a little groggy and confused, I wondered what kid could have come in here and drawn on the walls. Then I noticed the lines shift, move about. I realized they were tiny rivulets of rusty water, their source the welling cracks in the ceiling.

I ran unsteadily down the hall and out the apartment door, knocking into the walls and door frame. I was wearing a robe, and it caught on something, pulling me back, startling me. Finally, I made it up the stairs, and banged on Sylvain's door. I was

only here to tell him about the leaky water pipe, but I was filled with anxiety. The situation seemed to bode some disastrous event, a crumbling of our little world.

His bath water was running with such force now, there was no way he could hear me at the door. Our building was actually old enough to have doors with keyholes you could look through. I got down on my knees and peered inside. Straight in front of me, down the hall, Sylvain was standing in profile. Steam billowed out around him through the open door of his bathroom. I could tell from his pose — a certain shifting from side to side — he was looking at himself in the full-length mirror on his bathroom wall. I could also tell that he found something strange about himself. Something had been added, or perhaps taken away. He turned to look at himself sideways, and so faced me directly. I clearly saw his lips move. He was talking to himself. "J'ai de l'air invisible," he said, and his body seemed to act out this idea. There was an uncaring slump to his posture; he touched himself briefly, then let his hand drop to his side.

I got up, and slowly made my way downstairs, creeping lightly so as not to be heard. My retreat was the opposite of my advance. I felt a kind of culpability, not so much from watching my brother through a keyhole, but rather, from what I'd discovered. There was a new weakness in Sylvain that hadn't been there before. It was the same thing that pinned me down, kept me inside the apartment. Soon, he too, wouldn't be able to leave. I felt a responsibility for this, as if I'd brought this strange disease into our house. Then I thought absurdly, who would go out to buy the groceries, pick up the cut flowers?

But on the following morning, everything seemed, at first, back to normal. Sylvain took a quick bath, then banged his bike down the stairs as usual. I rushed to my door to catch him in the stairwell. "Sylvain!" My voice sounded frantic, but he looked up at me with his usual calm, bored expression. I wanted to give him some kind of warning, and at the same time reassure him. I wanted to say something silly and parental like, "Whatever you choose to do with your life is OK, as long as it doesn't hurt

anyone." He waited for me, looking up at me from the downstairs door, but all I could manage was, "You know your pipes are leaking."

"Huh?" His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Your pipes from your bath are dripping down through my ceiling. Every time you take a bath, water comes down my walls."

"OK'" he said, lifting the bike back onto his shoulder, and opening the door. "I'll call Monsieur Le Fustec."

The thought of our landlord coming over evoked a different anxiety, but this short banal conversation eased my fears about Sylvain. Before I could reply, he was out the door. I stood there staring at the little panes of rippled glass that let light into the stairwell, but didn't allow anyone to see in —or out. Finally, I followed him outside.

Lightly, careful where I placed my bare feet, I walked down the cement steps, and then right out onto the sidewalk and street. It had been quite a while since I'd gotten that far. I felt as if I was visiting some place, some neighbourhood that used to be familiar, that used to belong to me but didn't any more. The rows of flats, the spindly trees, the seagulls, even the warming air and blue sky all had this quality about them. It was as if everything had been copied — everything except myself. I felt unnoticed, unnoticeable. This was what made me so nervous and careful; anybody or anything could just happen along and wander right into me. I took a chance and leaned out into the street to watch Sylvain on his bike. He was down at the end of the block, about to make his turn off. I thought about what he'd said to himself the previous night — that he was invisible. And it was true, true for both of us. The drivers in cars didn't seem to notice him as he crossed the busy intersection that led to the bike paths. When the light changed, they took off right away. It looked as though they were going to run Sylvain down, but somehow he made it across to the park by the canal without getting hit, and soon he was out of sight. I imagined his progress along the path. The oncoming cyclists would give him no leeway, forcing him to ride cautiously to one side. He would

try to look them in the eye as they passed; but if they returned his glance, it would be only at random, as if they were looking right through him.

I could feel the pavement warming up under my feet in the strong morning sun. I was too on edge just to go back inside, and spend an ordinary day doing whatever it is I do in there. I felt like following Sylvain, running down the road after him, but he was already too far away and besides, I was afraid to venture that far. I sat down on the sidewalk by the gutter, and drew in the dust.

That part of me that was able to slip off and follow Sylvain throughout his day had disappeared. Sylvain was no longer substantial enough to support me, to carry me. Instead, I picked up only small scenes, unmoving, like illustrations from an old novel. I pictured him at the hospital. His co-workers treated him differently now. No one approached him. If he addressed anyone, they turned in his direction, but nothing he said quite registered. They focussed on a spot just above his head, as if some elusive object floated there — an aura or halo — vaguely attracting their attention. Soon, Sylvain only wanted to spend time with the terminal patients, especially his favorite old man, whose eyes still looked up at him with the same polished longing.

Since no one seemed to notice him, Sylvain decided he didn't need to stay in his hospital whites, and changed back into his bicycle gear. He did his work, and even skipped lunch, opting instead for the uneaten food left on the tray in the old man's room. He spent most of the day here, sitting and watching the old man from the visitor's chair, or standing hovering beside the bed. Finally, close to evening, well after Sylvain's shift was supposed to be finished, he decided to leave. The old man must have sensed this decision. A hand like white paper rose from the bed and touched Sylvain. There was a startling reminder of the hands of the old man touching him in the park the night before. It also signaled to him that the man might be near death. He should have run to get a doctor, or at least signalled to the floor nurse, but he didn't. Instead, he wrapped the man up, carefully winding him over and over in the bed sheet.

That evening was even hotter than the day; there was no breeze, no air. Dispirited, exhausted, I finally got up from the curb where I'd been sitting all day and went back inside. Sylvain still hadn't come home. I went to the bathroom, and I got ready for bed. My face in the medicine cabinet mirror was rosy, feverish-looking. I opened the small bathroom window. On the same few days every summer a torrent of shad flies came to life down by the canal. A few of them flew past my face in the window, attracted by the bathroom light bulb, creating flickering shadows.

I had another sudden image of Sylvain — a picture like the ones during the day, but in this one there was movement. It was like a scene from an old movie, stark black and white, where some momentous action is revealed . First, just Sylvain's face was illuminated by a flickering lamp. Nervous-looking, sweating, he was the opposite of his usual composed self. His moustache drooped and his jowls shook as the bike bounced along the uneven pavement. He was making his way home, cycling through the night along the bike paths. A swarm of shad flies danced around the bike lamp. Then the shock of the scene was revealed. A draped form of a figure was balanced across the handle bars; Sylvain had taken the old man from the hospital. One end of the sheet fluttered in the swift movement of the bike, a banner or white flag to whomever they passed in the darkness.

At last I heard Sylvain enter our building downstairs. His steps were heavy and slow. I could detect the extra weight he was carrying. I hesitated before opening my door, afraid of what I would find. When I did, his face loomed up right in front of mine, perspiring and red. He carried his bike on one shoulder as usual, but draped over the other was the form of the old man wound up in the white sheet.

"Qu'est ce-que tu fais là?" was all I could say, dropping into my old parental role. Sylvain stopped in front of me, said nothing, but continued to stare at me. His red sweatiness was so unusual, I was fascinated as well as shocked. I slowly raised my fingers to touch his cheek. I closed my eyes; there was no difference between his warm

skin and the warm night air.

Sylvain continued on up the stairs. In a few moments I heard the water running full and hard. I too decided to prepare a bath. I lit a candle, keeping the overhead light off. My skin in the mirror looked even more flushed, tatooed with faint, pink roses. The water stopped running upstairs, but Sylvain had filled the bath too high. I could hear the halting, choking sounds of the top drain skimming the surface of the bath.

The two of them must be in the bath together, I thought. Sylvain and that old man. Still wrapped in the sheet, Sylvain would place him in the water, thinking that this dried paper man would come back to life, like soup from an envelope. Sylvain would stand in the bath looking down at this figure immersed in the water before him, waiting expectantly for something to happen.

At the same moment, I was in my own bath staring up at the ceiling. If the ceiling light above me had been on, it would have flickered and flashed, because I was sure by now the water from upstairs had found its way into the wiring. The dried brown lines on the wall revitalized themselves, and shifted around like lightning in a storm. Then, above me, four holes, then four cannon balls appeared — the feet of Sylvain's bath. Plaster began feathering down like shad flies or snow. The weight of all that water, plus the drenched sheet, was too much for the already-weakened ceiling.

All things fall at the same velocity; however, for an instant, before Sylvain's bath landed on top of mine, I envisioned him suspended in mid-air above the pit created there beneath him. He looked like a painting from the ceiling of the Joliette church. His body was poised there with the white sheet, empty now, and floating around him like a cloud. The explosion of plaster dust blanched his hair and moustache. Then there was an ear-shattering sound, the gong created by the two baths colliding with one another. Sylvain's bath, being slightly larger, covered the top of mine like a lid. The force of impact, with the noise, pushed my head beneath the water. I was inside a giant bell, like the bell in a church tower. My eyes were shut tight.

The candle I'd lit earlier, is miraculously still flickering in the room. Along with my thoughts, I listen to the spraying water from the disconnected pipes. In the space I can see through, I try to focus on the tiny droplets that catch the light. Within the spraying sound, I think I can make out Sylvain's heavy breathing. I reach up and touch the dark, iron surface above me. It is rough, like old skin. It is also so close to my face, I feel as if I'm peering into it with great interest. But rather than reflecting my image, its old roughness makes my skin feel young, supple and alive. I am suddenly filled with energy. I make a fist and begin to pound the surface, hoping to revive Sylvain who, I believe, is lying just above me.

Man and his World

"Suddenly we do not know which is saddest: that night long ago, when, scattered across the immense surface of the earth, shivering and unarmed, human beings searched for one another in the shadows, or our own day when men have been made increasingly aware that they could become despicable to one another by virtue of mere proximity."
- Antoine de Saint Exupéry

I

"Stay with us!" my mother called. It was opening day of Expo '67: April 28, 1967. We were assembled at the enormous structure that was the main entrance to the site. My brother, at fourteen, three years older than me, was longing to escape us. He had run ahead into the crowd that was arriving from all the different ramps, stairs and escalators. My father, meanwhile, was heading towards the minirail platform, where trains were waiting to wisk visitors to various parts of the exhibition. Even my mother, as she tried to gather us all together, had struck up a conversation with a large black woman eating a Stuart nut and raisin pie. "I'm from Pittsburgh," she was saying. "And I lost my group." Only I, it seemed, remained in rooted one spot, stuck, while everyone else drifted outwards away from me.

All this chaos, along with the incredible sights of Expo, made people act differently. It was like a war or natural disaster where strangers, even adults, approach one another to try to figure out what's going on. It brought people together, which, I guess, is the whole purpose of a world's fair. For my parents, though, it seemed to separate them, make their physical differences more obvious. My mother was heavier than my father. She always looked slightly damp from exertion, while Dad was thin and dry. With her new psychedelic print dress, my mother stood out; she looked like another attraction. My father, in his usual gray or beige 'day-off' clothes blended in, like a

small sound lost in the noise of a parade.

Over the summer, my mother turned into a kind of volunteer tour guide, approaching anyone who looked lost, or even a little uncertain. Dragged along with her, I'd notice how a lot of people didn't really appreciate her coming up to them like that, asking them if they were looking for such places as the Minirail terminal or the American pavilion. Even if she'd been snubbed, she'd say to me afterwards, "I'm really good at this; I can usually guess where they want to go." Sometimes, though, I'd notice a little smile, the kind of smile that showed she knew she was being a bit foolish. My father, on the other hand, though friendly enough, stayed pretty quiet, usually following on at some distance behind my mother. I would often find myself running back and forth between them as we made our way through the site.

Most of these people my mother would 'guide' were tourists from outside the province. Sometimes my parents would joke about the "big dumb Americans". We'd laugh about them, but I couldn't help thinking our laughter, especially my father's, was a front, and that really we were a little afraid of them.

There was one incident which really marked for me the difference between my father and the tourists. It was a little later in the season, and the heat of the summer was just coming on. He and I were in a line-up to one of the pavilions. My mother and brother had already gone through, and stood looking back, waiting for us. Suddenly, two big men, like a solid wall, simply moved in from the side, jostling my father and taking their place ahead of us in line. I remember the arm sweeping out, holding us back for a moment. It was big and fleshy, and about level with my father's head. I'm sure it almost touched his face. What bothered him the most, I think, was that the men seemed completely unaware of what they were doing. That was what was most insulting. They weren't attacking us; they were just sweeping us away as if we were flies or dust.

Dad said something like, "Get in line," or "Can't you guys see there's a line?"

His voice, as usual, didn't have much volume, and the two men didn't even turn around. I imagined the fibers of their ear drums to be too toughened, and too high off the ground for my father's voice to register. They just gave each other a look, and folded their big arms, as if to make their position even more solid.

At my age then, everything was about size. I was constantly looking forward, looking up. When you're a kid, your parents are the model, the size you're supposed to grow into. But with these guys in front of us, pushing us out of the way like that, I felt as if I couldn't really look up at my father in the same way. He'd always had trouble breathing through his nose, which kept his thin-lipped mouth slightly open all the time. At that moment, this weakness made him look even more offended. He turned to look at me, and without saying anything seemed to ask, "Can you help me here?" I felt as if I were another adult, being summoned by an emergency. I was suddenly no longer under his protection.

The fact was I felt a kind of awe for these two men. It was a feeling I'd felt before looking at pictures in books, comics, superheroes. Now they were scaled-up and standing right in front of me. Their bodies shaped their clothes. There was no space around their pantlegs or shirt sleeves; everything was filled in. They seemed more real than my father, whose body was hidden somewhere inside his plaid summer shirt and baggy beige slacks.

To go along with their size, the men smelled of some strong after-shave or cologne — that mixed with a sweat caused by the heat of the day. There was something bleak and vinegary about the odor, but at the same time, it was attractive. My father must have noticed it, but he didn't say anything. It seemed this was something about the men that was too personal to be acknowledged.

We watched their progress as they advanced towards the entranceway of the pavilion, the crowd shifting and swaying around them. I thought my mother would intervene, try to direct them to the back of the line, but she didn't. She just watched

with her usual impatient waiting look, keeping her eyes fixed on us, her hand on the back of my brother's collar. She just ignored the two men as they brushed right past. Were they too much even for her? I thought there must be something really 'out of bounds' about the two men for her not to at least pass some remark on them. I didn't think it was their size that intimidated her, that kept her quiet. It was that smell — a silent advertisement for something else these men did, or could do, with their bodies.

Just as we were about to follow along inside, my father stopped, and began to back away from the entrance. "Those two have ruined my day," he said. He paused a moment, staring into the palm of his hand, then added "I'm heading for home," as if he meant to leave us all there. We stood for a moment watching him. This was the worst part of that whole scene. I felt as if I was watching my brother or some other kid who was about to burst into tears over some injury or unfairness. Even my mother was silent. I thought she would make a fuss over the fact that we'd waited so long in line, or quote some fact from her guide book about how this pavilion was a "must see". But as my father turned and headed towards the parking lot, she followed on behind.

As we walked away, I looked back and noticed the impressive size of the building we had almost entered. It was a five-story windowless block of concrete with the name Labyrinth inscribed in stark block letters across the top. The two men along with the rest of the crowd had, by now, disappeared inside it. Already new people were starting to gather for the next show.

We passed another family hurrying towards it. One of the younger ones looked up at her sister. "What's a labyrinth?," she asked. "A maze," the other said in a sharp show-offy tone. At first, I understood 'amaze' as amazing. But after a moment, my brain remembered the meaning of 'maze': a kind of puzzle, something you get lost in, meant to get you lost. Something cruel. And those two men were now swallowed up by it and had become part of its huge concrete mass.

Sometimes the beginning of friendships, especially childhood friendships, can be remembered and pinpointed exactly. It was on the same day — the day of the incident with the men in the line— that Leo and I became friends. I know because I remember the quiet in the car as we drove home from the site. My father was still in a bad mood.

As we turned into the driveway, I saw Leo out on the street playing by himself, throwing a football up in the air and catching it. He lived just up the street from us, but at twelve he seemed a generation older and we didn't mix. I noticed him, though; I knew who he was. Tanned and husky-looking, he always made me feel like the skinny weakling. He played football with a team in the fall, and hockey in winter, which I never got involved in. I wasn't a 'joiner', as my mother would say. Leo had all the Scout badges, which made me envious when he wore them to school on Baden-Powell day. He was already getting that gruff, adult male voice and stance — an act that older boys put on — but one that just about everybody the same age or younger took seriously.

"Why don't you go play with Leo," my mother suggested as we were getting out of the car. I think she was actually a little surprised when I said OK. Normally, I resisted her attempts to get me to make friends with other kids, especially someone from another year at school. But in the summer, things tend to get a little looser. There's lots of days with nothing to do, and the boundaries come down. But on this day it was a little different. The experience with the two men in the line-up and my father's crisis somehow pumped up my confidence. It was that feeling of strength mixed with meanness you get around the misfortune of others.

I headed over to Leo's section of the street. He eyed me coming over, but kept on tossing the football, giving it extra spins as he launched it, intent on perfecting his technique for the coming season. I think he was aware that we'd just gotten back from Expo; our family's enthusiasm for it by this time was well-known on the street. We were going there almost every weekend.

Watching the ball going up and down, I launched into my story. "Bit of a scrap

at the site today," I said, sounding as if it had become my job to keep an eye on such things. Leo immediately tucked the football under his arm, and gave me his full attention. I kept my spot close to the middle of our narrow street, giving me a little extra height, putting us eye to eye. I told him about the incident in the line-up, but I couldn't express everything about the two men. I didn't dare tell him — nor did I know how — about how the men had a certain odor, a perfume that hovered around them and silently described details of their skin under their clothes. Instead, my story was a cartoon which made the men even bigger than they were, pushing the whole line of people back. They became monsters that, at some point, would have to be hunted down.

We turned it into a game. We battled the two intruders, then became them ourselves, our bodies grown huge. Finally, we lay defeated side by side on the grass of a neighbour's front yard.

In the following days, Leo and I became friends. We began to spend a lot of time biking around together, and when I asked him if he'd like to come with us to Expo, he said it would "be cool", and half-jokingly added that we should bring our bikes along. Wanting to impress him, I asked my mother if this could be done. She was doubtful about it at first, but soon agreed when I pointed out to her a notice I'd found in the Expo guide book about how bicycles were welcome on the site.

"We'd be happy to have your Leo come along with us next Saturday," she said in her formal voice telephone voice. I was lying on the living room carpet, listening in to her conversation with Leo's mother. "My husband is putting a special attachment on the roof of the car so's the boys can bring their bicycles," she said. And it was true. My father liked these kind of projects. "We'll be able to use it next winter for skis," he said vaguely, though none of us had ever been skiing.

The following Saturday was hot, humid and overcast — the light in the sky was very bright, but flat like the fluorescent panels in the ceiling at school. When we got to Expo, Leo and I rode ahead of my parents, who strayed behind on foot. I wanted to

show off how familiar I was with the site, and led the way around groups of other people on the broad pathways. I think we could have gotten separated from my parents if my mother hadn't called out to us to stop as we approached the pavilion she'd planned for us to visit that day.

There was something forbidding about Man and His Health. The structure resembled a giant honeycomb or volcano, made up of wooden hexagons stacked on top of one another, getting smaller and smaller towards the top. All the hundreds of openings in the roof were covered by a translucent white plastic, which, as we saw when we entered, let in a bleak, white daylight. The line-up outside the building continued inside, a slow-moving single file past a series of glass cases. These contained displays of early medicine: illustrations of primitive operations, ancient scalpel blades in a variety of odd, curved shapes, engravings of people with their heads being forced into ovens. My father left us for a moment, then came back to say that a film was starting in five minutes. "If we skip this stuff," he said, "we could catch it."

Soon we were following another line into a huge darkened room, passing a sign that read, Meditheatre. Here, the audience became medical students, standing along a gallery that encircled the room, looking down at a mock operating room set-up. My father embarrassed me by pushing me, the smallest one, in front of Leo and himself, making sure I could see. There was another, smaller child in front of me. I thought of those pictures I'd seen of the food chain: a bunch of fish getting bigger and bigger, each one swallowing the last. I could feel Leo's body right behind me, his breath on the back of my neck. I crooked my head back to see him. He looked excited, his eyes glittering in the dark.

Then, bright operating room lights came on directly below us, to reveal a man in a surgeon's gown, masked and gloved. He held up his hands in surgeon-sterile fashion, or like a priest about to recite a mass. He then picked up a microphone from the table in front of him as if it was a surgical instrument. "Welcome to the Meditheatre, a theatre in

the round," he said, pointing to the screens above our heads. "Here you will witness six exciting aspects of medical skill applied to the extension or resumption of useful life. We will begin with the beginning: a birth." Here, the lights dimmed, and the screens filled with the grainy film of a cesarean section.

A large white stomach repeated in three places — in front of us and to either side. Several pairs of rubber-gloved hands fluttered around it, and then made an incision. I think that is the part about surgery that is hardest to take— the calm deliberation of the surgeons' hands as they slice the patient open. I lowered my eyes, and tried for a moment to focus on the head of the boy in front of me. I concentrated on his hair, the way it stood on end and seemed to swirl out from one point in the crown like a tiny hurricane. This calmed me for a moment, until I realized that he was doing fine with the film, was not the least bit bothered by the rush of medical gore. It was an added shock to think that everyone, even this kid who was younger than me, was familiar with this stuff.

Then I remembered that Leo was standing right behind me. I couldn't be sick with him here. I turned around to look at him, to make a connection; maybe make a joke out of this whole thing. But he was gone, and my father was gone, too. There was a sound like water running close to my ears. I thought it was part of the movie sound — a rushing of blood or other hospital sounds — but it was only in my head. The last thing I remember was that the two screens in my peripheral vision went fuzzy, then dark.

I came to on a bench outside in the grey humidity, my mother holding me up by one arm. Her Expo-style of organization had disappeared, replaced by her familiar, almost comforting, sense of panic. She was trying to pull me back to consciousness, normalcy. I tried to appear all right, to sit up straight, but then she forced my head down between my knees. "Take a deep breath," she said. "Now, let it it out slowly." In the corner of my eye, I could see Leo and my father at the next bench acting out the same procedure. My father was watching us, watching my mother's movements. "Now, let it out slowly," he repeated without much conviction. He also held Leo's head down, but

only by touching him with the very tips of his fingers. Then he got up and said that he would try to bring the car nearer so we wouldn't have to walk so far. Somehow he got special permission to drive onto the site so that the two "sick boys" wouldn't have to ride their bikes back to the parking lot.

Leo's tanned, healthy face had turned the same pale colour I was normally. We'd both fainted; we'd both been affected by the same thing. This, I later found out, wasn't such a big deal. Over the course of the summer, hundreds, maybe thousands of visitors, had the same reaction. But as I looked down at the ground between my feet as Leo did, waiting for my father to come back, I had the feeling that part of me, part of both of us, was draining into that ground.

II

As it happens, I'm standing now with my bike between my legs on the windy Montreal shoreline, on a crumbling pedestrian pathway that used to be part of the Expo site. The only sound is the humming of traffic on the metal grid of the old Victoria Bridge. I bike down here quite often; it's become one of my activities for lonely Sunday afternoons. I discovered the spot by accident, taking the new city bike paths to where they end. The smooth pavement, with its recently-painted yellow safety lines, stops abruptly in the gravel under the overhead expressway. On the other side is this lost tract of land. It's funny to think that the "official theme" of this forgotten place was Man and His World.

It was from the bridge that we saw this new city rising out of the islands in the river all those years ago. The car would drift closer and closer to the guard rail as my father craned his neck to see what was going on. Before this, our life in the suburbs on the South Shore was secure, rounded in on itself, a cocoon. It seemed that whatever rose up around us — even a new city — wouldn't really affect us. But it did. After that summer, after Expo, everything began to change. There were only four of us in the family, so when people disappeared it was very noticeable. My father took more and more

business trips, which somehow led to a divorce. "Your father and I are not the same people we were," my mother said in one of her brief explanations. I never heard his side of the story. His intermittent visits afterwards were somber and polite.

My brother's teenage years grew into a moody, sulky rebellion which led to his taking off as well — on some kind of trip to "find himself". When he came back for a visit, he was taller than us, and was masked by a full, heavy beard and long hair. He talked to me in bleak reports. "There's going to be a revolution," he'd say, "and nothing's going to be the same." I already knew that.

For a few years it was just my mother and myself alone at home. But fluttering around inside that house together, we didn't get closer. Rather, there was the sense of guilt and blame that accompanies survivors. We mostly avoided each other, or kept the T.V. on, blaring in the corner. Occasionally, though, she would make little outbursts, her short prescriptions. "You've got to get out there and sell yourself," she'd say. 'There' meant the world, which was anything outside our door.

I did finally move out to be a single man in the city. My excuse to myself as well as my mother was that I'd found a job too far to commute. She never found out what the job actually was: a 'towel boy' in a sauna, a position I hold to this day, though I'm now assistant manager. It's also where I met the man I live with — an Egyptian accountant who helps run the place, and whom I fear, in my deep-rooted suburban bigotry, will attack me one night with a long, curved Arabian knife. My mother is still living, still in the same house. When I call her, I usually sit staring at the T.V., and I can tell from the pauses on her end of the line that she's probably doing the same. I picture her either fairly young in her multi-coloured dress from the sixties, or old and hag-like, scaring any children who might creep up and peek in the windows.

I'm not far from where the entrance platform to Expo once stood. The original structure was so big and complicated, and yet there is not one piece of debris left. Several narrow

roadways lead outward like rays from this center point. I know they lead outward, but there is no evidence that the place was an entranceway, no clear markings of where the site began.

I continue along one of these abandoned roads, walking my bike further into the site. The gaps left by the torn-down buildings are defined by these roads leading around and up to where they once stood. The spindly trees planted for Expo have grown heavy, and sprawl wildly. They are filled now with noisy red-winged blackbirds. Landscaped hills and mounds created at the time to add diversity to the flat shoreline are covered with long grass, gone to seed.

Amid the hills and overgrowth are some fallen cement shapes, symbols of Expo's various themes. A column, like the letter "I" represents, I suppose, the individual. A square defines man-made space. A circle, the universe, or perhaps a germ. Finally, I come upon the official Man and His World symbol: two stick figures (lying side by side now in the long grass), with outstretched arms crossing each other, creating one unit of the two. The concrete has crumbled here and there, revealing a corrugated iron armature beneath.

Further on are other razed spots, foundations of what I remember were the Theme Pavilions. Man and His World was sub-divided into Man the Producer, Man and the Community, and Man and His Health, where the Meditheatre was. Up ahead are a few of the remaining pavilions that haven't as yet been demolished. Some have been recycled: a film studio, mysterious city offices, a museum no one seems to know about. Others stand empty, and seem to be the most forgotten.

One of these is the Labyrinth. It seems to have been left as a special monument to the scariness of Expo. Each time I come here, I look over at it but keep my distance. Although we did eventually make it inside for a visit, the building still represents for me those two bullying men who were swallowed up, and incorporated into it. After my visit to the Meditheatre, with its exploration of surgery, I realized that the Labyrinth was

about things that went on even deeper inside you. This hulking cement block represented the idea that human beings are really bigger on the inside than the outside.

It is around this spot, with its view of the Labyrinth, that I often lie down in the grass. I lay my bike down; there's nothing to lean it against. The back wheel spins lazily to a stop while I stare up at the sky, its blue now covered with haze. Without a sun to lie under, without a book to read, it might look like I've injured myself, or I'm sick. Perhaps I have passed out. I believe it was around here that the benches used to be, where I sat reviving beside Leo outside the Meditheatre. Perhaps the vibrations from our sick souls along with all the others that had a similar experience is rising up from the ground and making me feel somewhat faint and languorous. But most of those people went on with there lives, forgetting this event — as Leo did.

I remember quite soon after that visit to Expo, Leo and I drifted apart. Whenever I'd see him on the street, he'd look at me in a certain way, his head tilted slightly at an angle as if he was trying to figure me out, as if I personally was responsible for what had happened. I would just look back in the same way, hoping that by imitating him I'd smooth things over, make him accept me again. So the brief times we saw each other would be a kind of silent posing. With the return of school that fall, we saw each other even less. My mother through the years has given me various reports — his move to Vancouver, his new business career, a couple of marriages, a couple of children. She holds these up to me reproachfully, examples of things I should be doing. But I still ride my bicycle (I don't even have a driver's license), and I can't even imagine moving away, starting a new life.

Apparently, I am not the only one affected, the only one stunted and transfixed by these memories. Here and there amid the wild flowers, fallen symbols and broken futuristic lights, are other people — other false sunbathers. Each of them solitary and male, they lie about in various degrees of nakedness. I noticed these men the first time I returned here. All seem about the same age as me, the same generation that experienced

Expo with the first awakenings of their sex. Encounters sometimes take place in the bushes or behind fragments of stone, but for the most part they prefer to pose separately, remaining a possibility, an idea like the themes of Expo: Man and His Perversities.

As I pass by one of these men in the grass, he hardly stirs. Even when I walk very close by, his body seems pinned to the ground. The only reaction I get is when he lifts his head, looks at me for a moment, then seems to salute me, putting a very tanned, sun-wrinkled hand to his eyes to block the hazy sun. After a moment, he lets his arm and head fall back, as if they are too great a weight to support. But like flowers whose brilliant colours are meant to attract, these men need attention, the attention of some insect. I crouch down to touch one — the hard, purple iridescence of his bathing suit against the bright green of the grass.

"Ça va?" I say, employing my public French. It is the first time I've spoken on this quiet Sunday.

The man doesn't reply, but turns away, shifting his body away from me. I have done something wrong by speaking. I have either disturbed the sexual thrill of anonymity or broken the golden rule of the site: a place that must remain a silent memorial with those left here listening deeply into the ground. After a few moments, in which I stay quiet and unmoving, as if I am observing wild creatures, my trust is regained. The man rolls over and returns my touch.

After these hot summer afternoon visits, it's never easy to leave the site. Only hunger or the threat of dehydration finally forces me back onto the nearby bike paths and my apartment, my job, the shaky structure of my life. Today, I feel as if I will never leave. My bike and most of my clothes are left strewn on the grass as I walk slowly towards the Labyrinth. The sun has come out now in full force — reminding me of that summer in '67, the only time I visited this pavilion. I sit down and lean my back against the rough concrete wall, warmed in the sun. The entrance is now boarded up. There are

fire escapes: four doors, one above the other, along one of the building's oblique corners. These now open out on to suspended balconies. The iron staircase that once linked them with the ground lies rusting, detached from the building.

I remember after the ill-fated trip to the Meditheatre, I was nervous about coming to back to Expo, afraid of my own body's reactions to whatever exhibit I'd be forced into visiting. The Labyrinth was especially scary. A hundred, maybe two hundred people were let in at a time every hour or so. There was no sign or anything displaying the hour of the next presentation, only the barren concrete wall and closed steel door.

On the day we returned here, the sun beat straight down on us, dazzling us as we stood in the line-up. There was a quiet on that day like being adrift on a life-raft. As we waited, I recalled the incident with the two men that took place in front of these doors on our first, aborted visit. I fancied that they were still inside the building, and that we were in for another encounter with them. This thrilled my percolating imagination, and I thought up a number of scenarios which mostly ended with me being carted away unconscious— perhaps by these men.

A girl in front of us was leaning, half-sitting against the wall. There was a border of gravel like a symbolic moat from a Japanese garden all around the building, and she was passing the time picking up the stones and throwing them gently onto the pathway that led beside the area where we were standing. I thought for sure my mother was going to say something to her about it, but she seemed different today. Both my parents stayed very quiet along with everyone else. My mother was wearing a wide-brimmed sun hat which kept her face in shadow, making her seem absent. My father was leaning with one shoulder against the wall, his arms folded. He was, as usual, grey-looking despite the intense sun. Somehow I thought my parents' mood, their silence, was due to me. I was alone with them that day. My brother had stopped coming with us. He was allowed now to visit Expo alone with his friends. Even though I didn't really want to be there, I felt as though my parents were stuck with me, pinned to me, as though they too

would rather be somewhere else.

"Hey," my mother said at last. I looked up at her, startled, wondering what I had done. But she was looking past me at the girl throwing stones.

"Leave those stones where they are," she said.

I could tell the girl had heard my mother; she must have. But she ignored her, and turned to her friend, letting the stones drop from her hand, forgotten. It was just then that the line dislodged itself, rushed forward, and we were all ushered into a large space, a cramped hall or lobby that, as we would see, led into an enormous theatre. Under a single dim light was an inscription in raised metal which our group paused to read. "Today we are no less troubled by the torment of uncertainty, the mystery of our minds and bodies, the anguish of tomorrow, and the enigma of the present which remains forever a self-renewing labyrinth."

In a kind of populist way, Expo tried to tap into the fears inside us, the anxiety of existence. It tried to illustrate this 'big picture' with just that: a picture, a film projected onto an enormous screen stretched out on the floor of the theatre. As in the Meditheatre, the audience viewed the film from above, standing along four-tiered galleries that ran the length of three walls. Another screen, the same size as the one on the floor, hung on the fourth wall.

The first image of the film seemed a sequel to that of the Meditheatre: a new-born baby, huge on the screen below us. In this dark, cavernous space, my perception of depth disappeared. The pictures on the screen lost their physical placement and existed only in themselves — huge and floating, like scary ideas.

I thought about a recent sex education class, where I'd learned about eggs and sperm, and that baby girls' bodies, their wombs, possess all the eggs that will be produced in their lifetime. How are they all kept in there? And my balls were producing sperm in tiny rivulets that, if they were stretched out, would reach the height of a telephone pole — a common measurement, used as well for intestines.

Through all this, I could feel my mother's eyes looking down on me, watching, wondering if I was going to be sick, or pass out. Here, the sun hat she wore, rather than hiding her face, reflected the lights from the screen below us. She gave me the uneasy feeling that she knew all about this stuff. As in the Meditheatre, what was most disturbing was this idea that others were familiar, almost bored with all these images. "Are you OK?" she finally asked.

"I don't feel so good," I said. Perhaps I was just testing to see what she would do, to see if she really could find a way out of here. She immediately grabbed my hand — no, my forearm — for better grip, and within seconds found an Expo guide who produced a pocket flashlight, and led us quickly, efficiently out of the Labyrinth. Suddenly we were outside in the bright sunlight again, four stories up on the metal grating of the emergency exit.

"Sit down," she said. "Breath deep. Now, let it out slowly." It was a repetition of the same scene from the Meditheatre, and as I stared straight down through the metal grid, I had the same sensation from before, that a part of me was draining out into the ground below.

It's funny but I don't remember having left that spot, having unwound back through the building to find my father, get to the car, and drive home. All I remember, though, are those moments of breathing in and breathing out.

I sit now in a similar position, leaning against the vacant Labyrinth. I can feel the plywood sheets nailed up over its entrance move easily, lightly with my breathing. I get up and pull one of them aside. It's obvious others have already done the same. I pause for a moment, then go inside.

It is dark and cold, a real contrast to the day outside. Aside from this, the first thing I notice is an unpleasant squishy sensation as I walk in bare feet across old carpeting, wet with years of a leaky roof and no light or warmth. The air is damp and

musty — what you'd expect from an abandoned concrete building. There is also a strong odor of urine. I wonder why anyone would bother to come in here to take a pee.

I proceed very slowly, listening for any sound, thinking that there may be others hidden in the darkness. Somewhere lurking against the wall, are those two men from my yout. Huge and monstrous, they watch and recognize me with eyes evolved large from years of darkness. But I'm not at all nervous. I feel light, liberated. I laugh a little to myself thinking that since this is the Labyrinth, I should attach the thread of my underwear — the only thing I have on — to the place I'm starting from in order to find my way back. I imagine the tugging sound of cloth unravelling, the elastic waist band separating from the rest. Soon it would be a useless white belt, holding up nothing at all.

I soon stumble upon some stairs which I climb and count to six. After a short walk I arrive at another flight and then another and another. I lose count, and know only that I am ascending and ascending. Finally this stops, and I continue for quite a long time on a flat surface going in what seems like a straight line until I walk right into a wall. I turn, and walk to the left, and after a few paces, come to another wall. I go on like this, turning innumerable times. All this is done with only the sound of my bare feet squishing on the wet carpet.

"Arrêtez!" This voice is such a shock here, I double up as if to avoid a blow, as if something were falling on me. I then hear more squishing, but heavier than the sound I was making. The person is wearing shoes, workman's shoes. There is also the jingling of keys. The steps are quick and steady, as if he can see in the darkness. Then the sound stops, and there is a click. A small light bulb overhead is turned on. Still crouching down, looking down, all I see are shiny black shoes standing close to my dirty feet. Slowly I stand up, and I feel as if I have grown, become enormous, because this man is about the size of a ten year old child. But he is a man — an aging security guard in a uniform with the old Expo 67 symbol on it. They must have kept some staff after the

site closed. A skeleton staff — dwindling as the buildings were knocked down or turned into other things.

The guard talks to me. He drones on and on. I feel I recognize the words, but I can't follow what he's saying. Perhaps he has been driven mad by the Labyrinth, having been left here, forgotten. But there is something soothing in his monotone. It is a voice used to calm children or wild animals. Then, gently, almost shyly, he reaches up to take my wrist. His hand, small and grey, barely wraps half-way around it. He leads me away as if I were a giant child.

We go out on to the galleries of the auditorium. Here, a pale light creeps in from the half-open emergency exit doors. The auditorium seems shrunken now from the vastness I remember. It is rather like seeing an old monster movie — all the scariness is gone; only the artifice is apparent. The screens aren't that big. The one on the wall is torn and hangs down like drapery, while the one on the floor has conspicuous footprints across it.

I would like to stay here a moment, but we continue on to one of the exits. The guard lets go of my wrist to open the door for me, a gracious host. Then I feel his two hands on my lower back. I am pushed outside into the blinding daylight. The door clangs shut behind me. A rusty bolt is turned. I've been kicked out and locked out. With the fire escape stairs lying on the ground below, I'm stuck four stories up here on this balcony. Despit this, I can't help but notice beauty of the site below. Green and shimmering in the heat, it is even more impressive than when I was here in the same spot all those years ago. There is no one visible below (all my friends in the grass have disappeared or are camouflaged). However, far away, I can spot my own clothes on the grass where I left them, and I can just make out the glittering of the spokes on the wheel of my bike, turning by itself in the sunlight.

Time Machine

I

It seems as if my life has been a series of contradictions between the private world and the public. I've always been either trying to get into places or trying to get out of them. It was like that during my life with my parents, and after that with other people as well. By other people, I mean men. Dim, the Vietnamese refugee I married is an exception, a departure, or at least I hope so.

I first moved out from home to show everyone, especially myself, how, at twenty-three, I was quite grown up, an independent woman. The house had seemed too small, my parents too close to me in the crowded rooms. I felt awkward being there with them. I was still their child, their only child, only now I was too big, scaled up out of proportion. But when I did move out into the big person's world, I realized I didn't really have anything to offer, any reason for being there. I had a job and I had friends, but I was still very much tied to my home life, with phone calls and weekly visits. These visits would stay with me afterwards; I'd replay the banal scenes over and over in my mind all week. I'd head straight into the kitchen first to talk to my mother, to answer the usual questions: "How was your week?" "How is your job?"— always in a tone that meant it wasn't a real job, a real life. And she was right; I wasn't really attached to any person or profession.

Dad would stay in the living room until dinner. My mother would at some point push me out of the kitchen towards him. "Go sit with your father; he's not doing too badly today," she'd say, though he'd always look a little paler than the Sunday before. He'd have the dictionary or a volume of our old Encyclopedia Britannica propped up on a pillow on his lap. My efforts to talk to him were even more contrived than my mother's questions to me. He would remain almost speechless, like a monk or a shy child.

"What are you reading about?"I'd ask.

"Just browsing," An embarrassed smile would appear across his thin lips. These short encounters contrasted with memories of when he was loud, a power centre, the boss. I thought of other Marlboro cowboys now failing in cancer wards across the country. In fact, my visits with him finally ended in the hospital.

But after his death, the emblem for my father remained for me this kind of cowboy or pilot, driving the family car on our summer vacations. I kept a diary throughout my childhood and adolesence, from about age seven or eight up. For several summers in a row the same destination is described in its pages. Clark's Cabins was a string of ten or so runty clapboard cottages with screened-in front porches and numbered wooden shamrocks above each door. They bordered a "bottomless" rain-filled quarry infested with blood-suckers. I was afraid of Lac des Sources, a French name which sounded to me like 'dinosaurs'. I'd stay sitting at the edge, staring down at my feet which grew numb in the cold, yellow-green water. My father would barrel past me, and dive straight down. I'd watch his body follow the underwater cliffs which fell directly beneath me. I remember him and even my mother saying I was silly to be afraid of the lake, though I realize now it wasn't exactly an ideal place for children. My fears would often be justified as my father emerged from the water with several black worms hanging amid the gray hairs on his chest. Cheerfully, like a game, he'd have me sprinkle salt on them, and they'd fall off, sometimes leaving a dark trickle of blood.

"I'm hoping you'll stay at home with me for a while," my mother said after his funeral. I don't think she really wanted to have me at home that much. It was more something that she and I were supposed to do. Being the remaining members of the family, we should stick together. I did like the idea of having some social function, a responsibility, and I think my mother liked the notion of being in need.

For a while, the coming and going back and forth into the city changed the shape of my life. All that travelling added importance to what I did. Pretty soon though, time

slumped down into an assembly-line of days. My mother would get me up in the morning, I'd drive to my little job in my little car, and come home by six to some reheated Tupperware dinner. Then we'd sit together in front of the T.V. news, and usually the long line of programming after that.

I had to develop some other activity, anything that was an alternative to my weekly routine. My mother had bridge night which forced me out of the house. I went on occasion back into the city to visit friends. There was Carol, from the office, with whom I'd watch videos — sometimes porno, or rather, not really porno. They were something called "Erotic Fantasies", pornography for women, I suppose. They weren't even in the adult section of the video store.

One Friday night, I couldn't face the idea of driving back into the city (my friends never ventured out to the suburbs), so I walked over to the mall. The Chinese restaurant there was one of the few places that hadn't changed since my teenage years. I remembered the proprietors used to let us buy beers with our egg rolls, and so it was a regular hang-out.

The place began once again to be a Friday night habit for me. Now, though, I'd just sit in a corner and order tea. Not too thrilling, perhaps, but there was something vaguely enticing about being alone in this public place. I felt a lack of protection from other people's attention, as if I was on general display. If I'd been asked, I would have said I hated this feeling, but something came over me that made me want to use this attention. I've always felt this thing inside me, something hot and special that seems to take up physical space and ticks like a clock (I can hear it ticking sometimes in my head just behind my ear, or feel the vibrations of it right in my center). It happens especially when I feel I'm in situations like this. That's when I'm capable of doing things that are not really, well, right and proper. I want to use this attention, I guess, in a bad way, or in a way that isn't straight up. This is how I met Dim.

The restaurant itself hadn't changed since my teenage years. Dim's father had

bought the restaurant after their arrival here. My mother, in her not-so-subtly racist tone, said that despite the fact they were Boat People, they must have managed to bring with them quite a bit of money.

Dim worked behind the cash and helped out in the kitchen. I didn't really set out to seduce him there in the restaurant, he just became a part of my imaginary audience. Some nights, though, Dim and I were about the only ones in the restaurant, him coming and going out of the kitchen, moving things around, and me stationary at my table in the corner. He usually didn't wait on tables, but sometimes I'd stay until the waitress' shift was over, and he would attend to me.

There was an intense reserve in the way he served me my third cup of tea that betrayed an interest in me; I could tell. I felt bound by this reserve myself. I found the only way I could communicate with him was by the reading material I brought with me. When he came over to my table at the end of the night, it became important that he notice what was laid out in front of me. I began to stay right until closing so that some words would have to pass between us. At the moment he'd tell me I was to leave, he'd always look down to see the title of the book I was reading. These ranged from Haiku poetry, showing my sensitivity to the East, to self-help books such as "Counting Your Erogenous Zones".

One night, just before closing, I got up and left the restaurant. Passing the cash, I told Dim that I'd be right back. He nodded. I went to the pharmacy next door and bought a copy of Playgirl. I put it in my bag and marched back into the the restaurant, back to my table in the corner. A few moments later, Dim came over and placed the bill beside me. A naked man sporting a half-erect penis only partly hidden by a strategically placed hand smiled up at him from the table. Dim smiled too. But with this smile slight vertical lines appeared in the middle of his forehead, a strange rather stressful expression which I would see again and again especially after we married.

In the past, I'd pretty much scared off potential boyfriends. I myself was scared

by the prospect of continued encounters, dates. Sex was an occurrence rather than the expression of a relationship — taking place in someone's bathroom at a party or in cars, in fact, most often in cars. For a time, I began to equate sex with parked cars. Just walking down the street, seeing them all lined up along the sidewalk waiting, represented for me a series of bridal suites — the chrome, the windows, the chance of being caught; this was all part of my formula. Plus, you're only in cars to get from here to there, like casual sex.

But Dim and I dated. We went to the movies, usually at the cinema in the same mall as the restaurant. Often we'd go to the Friday night late show after the restaurant closed. It was either empty or crammed with kids if there was a scary movie — a "fright night"— another throw-back to when I was a teenager.

Our first date was about a half an hour after my Playgirl exhibition. We were forced, because of a big crowd, to sit right at the front through an hour and a half of "It Came from Within", a horror film in which the monsters were viruses working their way out from inside their victims. Dim on several occasions grabbed my thigh hard, almost painfully. I didn't take this as an advance, a 'move', but just something that was part of the horror movie experience.

Above the restaurant, there were several large, unused offices that Dim had access to. We went up there on that first date and on just about all the other movie nights. This was where we first actually talked to one another. We sat cross-legged on the gray industrial carpet in one of the empty rooms. Some flourescent tubes flickered weakly above our heads, but most of the light came from the streetlights outside.

"You like to read?" he asked. I answered in a lengthy ramble, talking about my favorite books, series I'd read as a child, the fact that there wasn't much else to do in the suburbs besides watching TV or hanging around the mall.

When I stopped talking, he asked me if I liked boys. I didn't know what to reply. "I guess so," I said. Then, he did something which was, I suppose, his answer to what

I'd done earlier with the magazine. He'd been wearing those flyless rugby pants which were popular that year. Maroon colour. Quickly, deftly, he pulled them off. He wasn't wearing anything underneath. I thought of just getting up and walking out. I could have, but I stayed, and we had sex there on the floor, the lights above us, flickering in my eyes. The other thing I remember is that for some reason, while we were doing it, he removed his watch and placed it beside my head. The strangest part of it is that I distinctly remember turning and looking at the luminous dial, and for a few moments seeing the digital seconds count backwards: 53, 52, 51... Then they shifted back to their regular forward march.

The wedding reception was held in the restaurant. Long strings of white porcelain beads were draped around potted hibiscus trees which had been brought in for the occasion. The tables were arranged in long rows, and we were served a variety of delicate little dishes, all of which I sat through in a daze. I remember my mother dancing with Dim's father. There was no Mrs. Dim. Some turn of events had left her in Viet Nam. He was very thin, only slightly taller than my short, round mother. In his dark, almost severe-looking suit, he seemed neatly tragic. Beside him, my mother looked like a colorful cake, glazed and slightly melted. She held onto him in that way, as if she would slide down the cloth of his suit leaving him wet and sticky. The only consistent thing about her was a gracious smile that she kept throughout the whole event.

It was the same smile she had when I first told her the news. We'd been sitting in our usual places after dinner in front of the T.V. (I must have told her with the T.V on, because I remember she was prompted to get up and turn it off.) Then she turned back and faced me with this smile on her face. There was a moment of silence with only the hum of the old TV fading out. She looked small inside her house dress, which hung about her like a tent or a brightly-coloured flag. I was beginning to feel large again, too large, as when I first moved out of the house.

"I'm so happy for you," she said, finally. With this tired pronouncement, my heart went out to her. It was like her asking me to come and live with her after father died. Life for her was a series of these statements. This time, though, it was my action that prompted this new movement, this next step in her life. With this assurance from the family (my mother), my relationship with Dim for the first time seemed real.

We had spent the last few months repeating, over and over, our initial "date". I continued to drink tea and read in my corner of the restaurant until closing time. Sometimes I would open the same old copy of Playgirl when he came over to me, our little joke. We would usually go to the cinema before going upstairs to the "office", which never grew in comfort — we always just lay on the dirty old carpet. Sometimes, though, we went downtown. On these excursions I felt like a big sister. Dim was unfamiliar with the city, and I had the all-important control of the car; I was the one that took us where we were going. We sometimes went to motels to "spice things up", as I'd say to Dim. He looked so young; he could have been put at about nineteen, or less. He hid in the car while I went to register. This created for me a kind of game: we were spies. An odd-looking duo — this rather tall, hefty-looking white girl with this Asian boy. It was like some taboo adventure we were having. I never thought of myself as racist, but the notion of the exotic was definitely there for me. Also, it was never scary; there was never any sense of real danger. His lean brown body weighed nothing on me. Sex, everything, was a game. It was perfect for me.

The night he asked me to marry him, Mr. Smile, as we'd begun to call him, was looking up from his place in the magazine on my table. Dim for the first time, sat down with me. He then reached over and closed the magazine.

I now realize this was an important moment. But at the time his question, his proposal seemed part of our game. He said, "My father has been wondering what we are doing together."

"Yes?" I said.

"He wants to know if we're serious."

"Well, I'm quite a bit older than you," I said. "I'm twenty-eight."

Dim then got up from the table and walked away. For a moment, I thought I'd really put him off. He crouched down behind the cash counter, disappearing for a few minutes. But then he jumped up again, clutching what he'd been looking for: an old manila folder which he brought back to the table. Inside were his passport and a birth certificate printed in Vietnamese and French. He was thirty-two.

I was so surprised, his proposal got lost, sifted into the rest of that meeting. I don't even know if he ever actually asked me. It was when I came back next time, for our next date, that he told me that the arrangements had been made. And it was only in telling my mother the following day that things settled into place for me.

Somehow, almost instantly, seamlessly, my taboo world fitted into one of my mother's pronouncements. "If only your father could have been here," she said at some point — either at home when I first told her or at the end of the wedding party. My father, who hadn't been referred to since the funeral, was being evoked now like a kind of telegram. But the father I remember wouldn't have been here. He didn't comport himself well in other people's situations. His assurances were non-transferable, not even to us, to me. He, like me, aspired to be the driver. That's why I remember him mostly that way, in the driver's seat.

On our family junkets, I would be alone in the back seat. My mother, up front, always seemed to be turned slightly in the seat as if prepared to shoulder into the dashboard or windshield in case of an accident. Watching Dad from the back , I'd notice his eyes glance up from time to time into the rearview mirror. I was never sure if he was looking directly at me or at the retreating road behind.

During the drive to Clarke's Cabins, or on our way back, or sometimes just out for the day, we would go exploring, as my father called it. We'd always take the back roads, the old highways that passed through small farming communities. These were

often single lane, cracked and bumpy, the only other traffic being tractors and farm trucks.

My mother's car-nervousness would increase, sometimes worrying out loud that we were lost. Usually my father would just laugh at her, but he did react angrily at times. "Don't you trust me?" he'd say. And once, perhaps more than once, he struck her — quick and effortlessly like a sting. In fact, I can't remember seeing him do it, only the aftermath: my mother cradling her pale fleshy arm exposed in her summer dress. The car swerved, fishtailing down the narrow road until my father got control of it again. I remember not being at all upset by the event. I felt instead a kind of thrill at being a witness, close to but hidden from a crime.

On our wedding night, Dim and I stayed at a motel in the city, the same one we'd stayed in before. This time though we registered together as Mr. and Mrs. The spy game was over. I must have been a disappointing bride; I fell asleep almost immediately. Drained and confused, my life with Dim having switched into another mode, one which I couldn't as yet define.

In the very early morning, I woke up to find Dim lying on top of me. So light, like an angel, he could have been there all night. I asked him if he had his full weight on me, and he lifted his hands above my head and clapped sharply as if performing some acrobatic trick. There was also a touch of anger in this action, which, oddly, prompted me to say, "I'll lose weight for you." Perhaps I was giving up my position as 'big sister', vowing to physically reduce my size. But it also had the ring of one of my mother's declarations, a clichéd statement marking another phase of life.

Dim's simple reply, "Thank you," shocked me. It seemed that it was normal that I should change for him. Obviously, for Dim, the strange woman at the table in the restaurant beside the picture ked man, was no longer. Mr. Smile was dead.

We moved into the office space above the restaurant, our old haunt. It would be our temporary home until we could get on our own. But like our other activities, this place was now co-opted. We were given furniture.

The room we set up as our kitchen had sliding glass doors that led out onto the roof of the back part of the building. This enormous expanse,which resembled a gravel and tar football field, was littered with construction junk — spools of electrical wires, cables, copper and plastic piping. I didn't hate this view. It cut us off from the rest of the town, bleak anyway at that time of year, late November.

Soon after we moved in, I lost my job. My firing wasn't a big surprise. I had been warned months before that "a lack of initiative during a recession is an unfortunate combination". It was a dizzying phrase, a confusing prescription, that seemed to spin me around and painlessly lead me out the door. Also, I'm sure my marriage provided the right impetus for my employers. I would, after all, have a man to provide for me, and I was no longer taking care of my widowed mother. I wasn't so much upset about suddenly being unemployed as feeling bewildered out on the street at the wrong time of day. Having left the office at about three o'clock with my small bag of personal items, I started to wander, walking right past my parked car, exploring streets I was unfamiliar with, going through alleyways, coming at last upon a park — one of the largest in the city. I set out across it diagonally, across a big field of grass, ignoring the neat gravel paths that ran up the sides. Off these paths I wasn't a part of any planned direction; I was a person alone, adrift. The sky cleared. It became very bright. There was nothing blocking the light, though the sun was by now quite low. It shone uninterrupted through the bare trees.

Right in the middle of this field, looking as if it had been dropped down there by accident, was a park bench. Of course, I sat down. The bench must have settled over the years, giving it an uneven tilt. It shifted my weight backwards and to one side, lifting my feet off the ground. A light breeze played with the hem of my skirt, my office

clothes. This funny, child-like position along with my drifting around in the middle of this bright day brought back that feeling I'd had hanging around Dim's father's restaurant. I felt anonymous, a floating red balloon, attractive to whomever might want to stop and take me away.

Despite all these thoughts and transformations, I ended up getting back to our place at my usual after-work time. When Dim came up the stairs from the restaurant, I almost told him right away about losing my job, but I stopped when I noticed the red mark on his forehead. A method he had for curing headaches was to pinch the skin between his eyebrows, causing what looked like a burn or an insect bite. Lately he'd been worrying about money, wanting, wondering when we'd be able to move out from the mall. I didn't think the restaurant was doing very well. He would often go to his father's apartment for an hour or two in the evenings to "discuss business". I was never invited to these meetings. On this particular night, he took a bottle of Saki from his newly-bought attaché case. Pilfered from downstairs, it was a new addition to the menu, an effort to widen the restaurant's market. I took it, and put it on the stove to heat up in a small pot of water; this would be our evening meal.

I don't watch for signs; I'm not superstitious, however, the following day, the view outside our sliding glass doors was of a heavy gray sky with occasional black things flying or running by — crows and black cats. It all seemed very personalized, a vision meant only for me. The feelings inside of me, which had been awakened the previous day in the park were being nurtured here in the empty apartment.

I got dressed and went outside onto this enormous balcony. I began to gather up all the scattered debris out there into one large pile — an effort to make me feel more in control of my world, my scary feelings. By the end of the afternoon, it began to snow, the first snow of winter. At first it melted as soon as it hit the roof's black surface, but gradually it began to collect. The pile of junk that I'd created that morning became a unified mass under the snow. The unidentified plugs and cables took on the look of the

Christmas decorations that were beginning to appear around the mall.

II

On our explorations down those back roads, my father used to stop at old abandoned farm houses — the kind with boarded-up windows and hulks of cars strewn out front, tall grass growing through the broken windshields.

"Hasn't seen a coat of paint in forty years," he was fond of saying.

Some, we'd visited repeatedly from summer to summer. They got to be familiar haunts. One such house seemed to have some special significance to both my parents. My mother as usual would stay in the car, but she seemed especially nervous, affected by this house. I put it to the bullet holes in the no trespassing sign that greeted us on the overgrown driveway. My father's interest seemed markedly deeper for this house. It was more protected than the others, boarded up but for one or two corners of windows which revealed in the slats of light, rooms still filled with furniture. It was as if someone had one day just boarded up the place and left. My father would pace around the outside of the place, peering in here and there, while I would run along behind looking in the places I could reach. Sometimes he'd lift me up, and we'd look inside together. Seen this way, through the dusty glass, the rooms seemed perfectly preserved, museum pieces that no one was allowed to disturb. It was always the same, from one visit to the next. I was growing older, getting bigger, but this place was immune to time.

It was on about our forth or fifth visit that we were able to get inside. I remember the radio going on and on at the time about Watergate. My father turned off the car, and with it the radio. For a few moments the three of us sat there in silence. My mother shifted in her seat while the car cooled and ticked around us . Usually she would protest these stops, telling my father that we were trespassing, which he always ignored. Today she just said, "Poor Nixon". It was a different tact, a reminder of the real world, an effort to get us back on the road, and on to the big highway. But my father was intently

staring at the house in front of us. Something fundamental about it had changed since last time. After a moment he jumped in his seat, and slapped the steering wheel.

"The front door isn't boarded up anymore," he said. He got out of the car and slammed the door. My mother and I watched him walk through the tall grass towards the house.

During these weeks of unemployment, I try to keep to some kind of routine. I get up late, have toast and tea, do the dishes, and for a couple of hours sit at the kitchen table (our only table). I've retrieved my old diary, a red-covered book in one of my as yet unpacked boxes. Its useless lock breaks open easily. There's no more room inside, so I leave it in front of me, open to the last page, and write on loose-leaf paper which I will later staple into the book.

I start by writing down daily incidents. At first, it's things about Dim. Recent things such as the moment when I finally told him I'd lost my job. I describe his perplexed look, those vertical lines, and the way he struck me across the chin — lightly, barely felt, yet out of control, a car fishtailing down the highway. I don't try to analyze it other than remark that it is one of the few moments of attention I've gotten from him lately.

I stay at home here above the restaurant most days, waiting for my unemployment cheques. (I may never get anything because I was fired.) Nothing changes in this small world except what I do or make. The coffee turns cold beside me. The felt pens I like to use dry up in my hand. Other monuments grow around me: balled-up paper on the floor, macaroni and cheese forgotten on the stove, cookies with one bite out of them. It seems as if the things I touch, use and then discard might remain there forever, cold and dried.

When Dim comes back home, back up the stairs, this force other than my own causes everything to tumble. For a few moments, I stay where I am, at my place at the

table, as if to avoid contact with him. Then the little bottle of Saki comes out, a new habit that erases what's been built up over the day. The next morning, I watch Dim's legs skip off out of the bedroom to our makeshift shower, and the dull spell of my routine creeps up again.

I'm keeping the promise I made to Dim when we were first married; living on saki, I'm losing weight. Somehow, though, he seems to be gaining weight. His face is falling, getting jowly, metamorphosing from adolescence straight in to middle age. All of a sudden, he really is older than me. We still hardly talk. Before, though, during our dating period, this silence was part of our game. Now, his silence is a disavowal of what he thought of me then. I think he thinks I'm bad; capable of only bad things. I don't deny those things are there. But my sexuality, my fantasies, my longings, whatever, I know are not really bad. They are more a kind of sloppiness, rusted barrels of contaminated waste buried and unseen, but leaking dangerously into the ground water. Now though, with all the free time I have, it all seems to be growing, sub-dividing, as in a bad horror film, or like the mountain of junk I've built outside our back window, waiting to be exposed again in the spring.

My writing is an outlet for these things. I no longer write about real things that happen, but invent situations. I write them down in the thick childish scrawl of a felt marker. Something about the look of this writing makes these confessions seem more real, believable. I imagine myself in various positions. I'm in the middle of a large field, like the park I walked through the day I lost my job. Someone has tied me to the bench. I am exposed and vulnerable. A long line of people forms, stretching across the field to where I am. Slowly, each one passes by, poking and prodding me. I am like that house we used to visit, boarded up for many years, now opened up; its once protected interior available to whomever passes by. Although I'm forced into it, I want these things to happen.

Afterwards, I trim the pages I've written on to fit them into the back of my old

diary. In doing this, I can't help but refer back to my last entry, made many years ago:

The day was overcast and bright. The screen door, once nailed shut, now rattled lightly in the breeze. On the inside door there were stuck-on decals: emblems, not exactly boy scouts', but something like it. Inside, all the furniture was as neatly placed as it when we looked through the window on our last visit. It was like we had gotten into an Egyptian tomb where the objects of the pharaoh's life accompany him. Though it was summer outside, here it was cool, untouched except for the layers of dust. Everything was like new. The red brocade on the couch, the lamp shade tassels, even scraps of paper, forgotten hasty notes.

Dad walked through the rooms. It was funny but, I got the feeling that the furniture would have turned and watched him, if it hadn't have been weighed down by time and dust. He walked, I thought, like a groom — that was the effect he was having on that poor lonely house. It was as if it was greeting him, receiving him. I felt ignored, and my mother, still waiting outside in the car, was doubly ignored. Suddenly, he stopped, and kicked a big red chesterfield, sending a cloud of dust into the air. He laughed, just a chuckle, but it wasn't nice; I didn't like the sound of it at all. It was scary, as if he'd stood up in a rowboat and was rocking it dangerously. Sit down, I felt like saying, but he moved, almost ran past me to the stairs, then up into the dark. I followed, and stood looking up. It was very dark up there. Straining to see, I caught just the pinpoints of light, a reflection from his eyes looking back down at me.

This is where my diary ends—unfinished, unresolved. I leave it open, and hastily attach my new pages onto the back cover.

I get dressed and go outside. I walk along the streets of my childhood. I go home, as I would have from grade school; that is, I revive a routine, summon it up from all those years ago. It's quite late, later than lunchtime, so I recall a time when I was sent home early in the afternoon. It was a day like my firing, another result of not fit-

ting in. I was feeling ill in class — during music class. The teacher was explaining the functioning of the vocal chords, the way they stretch inside the throat. She drew a picture on the board using special pink chalk to represent the flesh. I put up my hand. She was expecting some pertinent question."Yes?" she asked.

"I'm not feeling so good," I stated. She repeated my statement somewhat mockingly to the class, "I'm not feeling so good." I decided to take this as a permission to leave, and shakily got up from my place and left the classroom. I walked home, and still managed to bring the emptied garbage can around to the back of our house, my little job back then.

Today, as I walk up the front steps, I realize my mother isn't home. There are several days worth of circulars strewn on the front stairs. Off on some golden agers junket, I think.

I still carry a key; I let myself in. I look around the empty rooms and replay that last scene from my diary as if I'm revisiting the old abandoned house. I try to evoke what happened next, what wasn't written down. I prowl around. I go to the bottom of the stairs, and look upwards. I can remember nothing, only my leaving, the screen door banging shut behind me as I walked outside. I remember for a moment being dazzled by the overcast brightness of the day. On a sunny day, the light comes from one direction, but on an overcast day, especially in mid-summer, the light can seem to come from everywhere. Also, on a day like that the time is hard to determine; it could be morning or late afternoon. I can still picture the tall grass, and my mother standing by the opened car door, waiting. I realize now that I came out of the house without my father. In fact, that's the last image I have of him, in that time before he was always at home sick in his living room chair. A part of him ends in that abandoned house, up those dark stairs. He's up there waiting, lurking, the same energetic unattainable groom I see in all men.

Arriving back at our place above the restaurant, I find the door unlocked. Dim is already home. He stands like a narrow column in the kitchen, which is almost dark now in the late winter afternoon. His hands clenched and turned upwards, hold bunches of torn-up paper. He has found and destroyed part of my diary, which had been left open on the table, its large writing like a childish sign.

"What are you doing in the dark," I whisper, not knowing what else to say. I flick on the ceiling lamp, and there is a sudden flash as if it's blown. I duck down involuntarily. I don't see his movements, but the air has filled with paper. It falls around us, slowly like a gentle snow.

Dim remains standing, his hands at his sides now, open but still tense-looking. I walk around him and sit down at the table. I imagine the paper that was there, the diary, as fuel that has been lit up, as if the molecules of paper have been jarred out of time's steady hold. They are now rattling off into the past or the future.

I don't know whether this action of Dim's has finished us off or somehow reconciled us. Perhaps a new connection has been created between us. I sense that Dim, as well, is unsure about what has happened. I think he suspects some new change in me.

Tonight it is he who heats up the saki on the stove. Looking through the window, we watch the snow fall during the night on the expanse of our rooftop garden. While we sleep, the pile of junk I'd left there remains miraculously stationary while everything moves beneath it with the world's regular rotation. By morning, it will have completely disappeared.

Good Luck, Bad

We're all born with a clean slate. Little by little it gets marked up, chalk marks of bad deeds on our souls, as Sister Anthony told us in Grade One. Sins. They could be removed, but it takes a lot of work to attain forgiveness — not like erasing the board in school. It's a more ground-in stain, wine on white satin, bleeding into the fibers. But not only does it look bad, it affects you and the things you do. The more stains you get, the worse it is. It becomes harder for you to be good. Your past not only affects your present but also determines your future. Obstacles, problems just fall into your lap. The proverbial dark cloud follows you around, making you do badder and badder things. Most people just say 'this guy's lucky', or 'this guy's unlucky'; but really, you make your own luck.

There was a thump at the front door downstairs. I sat up in bed. It was probably just some kid delivering ads, but it felt more ominous than that. I'd been lying awake on this Sunday morning— my time to worry about all my problems, my lack of career, my time running out, etc. This sound seemed an answer to my early morning fears. I hadn't even gotten out of bed and something had happened to me.

Being careful not to wake my girlfriend Sadie, I crept quietly down the inside front stairs of our flat to collect whatever had dropped in on us. It was a package from my parents. I recognized my mother's flowery scrawl, which just said 'Jonathan'. I threw it on the kitchen counter assuming it contained my mail delivered to my parents' address: more bills. I went back to bed.

"What is it?" Sadie murmured, turning over.

"A package from my mother."

"What? Did they just throw it at the door and keep driving?"

"Yeah, I guess so; shit just happens, right?" An odd thing to say, but Sadie didn't

react. She'd already drifted off again. Listening to her even breathing, I slumped back under the covers, and stared up at the ceiling.

I only recently began to take the idea of luck seriously, or rather, to become obsessed by it. But it wasn't packages from my parents that had aroused my superstitions. Mostly, it was my financial troubles, my recent unemployment. In addition to applying for jobs in the paper, I'd taken to buying lottery tickets, and worked out a theory which applied to the job hunt as well. I was convinced that the reason I hadn't won so far was because I couldn't help dwelling on the idea of being an instant millionaire. From reading about winners in the paper, I realized that most of them bought their tickets as part of a group, a pool. These groups purchased many tickets, so bettering their chances, but I think their luck was due to the fact that usually the tickets are checked every week by only one member of the pool, making the others unmindful of the prospect of winning, perhaps even forgetting they possessed tickets. The one person who held the tickets remained aware, maybe even excited about winning, but this was offset just enough by the others who thought nothing about it. I reasoned that if I could just find the right balance in my mind between knowing and unknowing, if I could walk trance-like into the the corner store to check out the winning numbers, or watch them being announced on T.V. with a certain half-closed eye, my chances would be greatly improved.

As for job-hunting, the same thing applied. It was much easier to get a job you really didn't want. I remember a previous stint of unemployment when I didn't particularly want a job, but was only applying for jobs to satisfy the UI office. I wandered into an interview for an assistant art director job in old jeans and a plaid work shirt — a position I ended up getting and hating for three years.

Now, though, my needs, my debts and mounting anxiety all seem to have consumed my luck. They have become my dark cloud. But towering above this on into the stratosphere, the greatest influence on my luck is sex. As a Catholic child you're never really told sex is wrong; you're just never told anything. Sex is just some mysterious

dark area that, by default, sin takes over. Today, I feel there is some sort of Zen balance that is even more complex than winning the lottery: the effect of one's moral behavior upon the physical universe.

Life with Sadie, whom I'd been with for two years, was the day-to-day part of this theory. As I watched her sleeping beside me, I thought the best I could hope for was some kind of comfort zone. Sex for us had evolved into a weekly event — Saturday or Sunday morning. It was Sunday now, and besides rambling in my thoughts and anxieties, I was waiting for her to wake up. Yesterday I'd waited too, but she'd just jumped out of bed as soon as she'd opened her eyes, complaining of back-ache.

I didn't want to take any chances. I began, lightly at first, to play with her nipples, hoping for the right response, a change in her slow even breathing, a low sigh. I soon got it, barely perceptible, but there. Slowly, I moved on top of her, lightly hovering, supporting myself as if doing push-ups. Finally, she reached up to my sides and directed me, turning me 180 degrees to the '69' position. Sex had become digital, programmed. It was me that had initiated this routine originally. Somehow it stuck. There was something very male about it, the way it disembodied the genitals, focused on them. Also, it prevented us from looking each other in the face.

"So what was that thing." Sadie was talking to me. I lifted myself up a little, and looked at her upside down, under my belly and between my legs. She was holding my penis like a microphone.

"The thing that came in the door," she continued. "I heard you get up."

"I told you. Don't you remember?" I could feel myself wilting in her hand. "A package from my mother."

She didn't reply to this, but got back to business. I went down on her too, creating our circle of sensory confusion. After what felt like an adequate time, I pulled away, allowing her own fingers to find the place. This was the part I liked the most: watching ourselves in the closet-door mirror at the foot of the bed. Sometimes I'd shift over so I

could see better, and Sadie wouldn't realize why I was moving. This in itself was a little sin, which tainted the good I was doing, but it was the only way I could get through it.

I continued to play with her nipples, pinching them, I thought, just enough. Finally, she made a sound like a single cry for help, then she relaxed beneath me. Usually she stayed there, allowing me to finish above her, touching me, encouraging me. But on that morning, she pulled away, rolled over, and was out of the bed. I was left to watch myself masturbate over the empty sheets.

Sex had not always been so detached, so mechanical, but since the beginning there'd been problems. Both Sadie and I never got comfortable with contraceptive and safe-sex appliances. We didn't want to have babies (for now), and we were very aware of AIDS, to the point of paranoia — too paranoid to get tested.

That's how our sexual methods were evolved — like a stunted over-tended tree, a bonsai. It was like my luck, the way my luck stunted and shaped my own life. There were many furtive branches, quickly clipped off, their absence affecting me afterwards. Despite the fear of AIDS, etc., I cheated on Sadie constantly. Not in anything so direct and traditional as having another lover. Instead, I went for "erotic massages". When I went to these places, it didn't seem like I was cheating; the difference was in the presentation. The clean, spartan cubicles, the little examination room beds made you feel like you had to be there, that you couldn't want to be there. The women, the girls, acted like nurses, keeping a bedside manner, while the client remained prone and passive — a patient.

But these activities did have their repercussions. Almost immediately following my last time there I thought I had contracted gonorrhea. I had had it for real several years ago, and I seemed to be experiencing the same symptoms — an irritation, a burning sensation when I peed — just enough to make me go to a doctor and get a prescription. The test turned out negative though, proving that it was all my imagination. It was just a case of nerves brought on by the concern that I might be giving Sadie a dose, conducting

some insidious micro-organism into her body.

I thought that this scare would be the end of it, that my sins would be paid off. But it was in the following week that I lost my job. Without warning, the company I worked for, Import Records, closed down half its shipping department in the Montreal office. Because I wasn't part of the permanent staff (I'd been working 'under the table' for the last couple of years), I was one of the first to be let go. Furthermore, since I wasn't a registered employee, I wasn't eligible for UI.

"Shit happens, Johnny," someone said to me when I got the news. "Tough luck".

But I believed that this situation was my own doing. The complex knitting of my thoughts and actions had succeeded in cutting me off, isolating me. I was in a state of ungrace.

I picked up the brown envelope from my mother, ripped it open, and emptied the contents onto the kitchen counter. Sadie and I had just finished breakfast together. It was Sunday afternoon now, my day to go through all the want ads in the weekend papers.

"Post cards," Sadie said, picking at them, turning them over. "Some of them are really old."

"You know what these are?" I was astonished. "These are all the post cards from my brother. He sends one or two every year. Ever since he left home."

"Which was like ten years ago, right?"

"Try twenty. More than twenty. He was about nineteen at the time, and I was only ten, so I don't really remember him that much. I can picture him, but not that well. I remember mostly the fights with my parents. Anyway, he sends them just to let us know he's alright. He's always in a different place, never with any return address."

"This one was mailed just this year", Sadie began to read, 'After a brief stop-over in Bangor, I'll be heading up the Cabot trail, where I'll have to bivouac if I can't get a lift straight through to the Canadian border. See you later — Rick.' "Was he on his way

home?"

" No. He just appears here and there on the map randomly. If you look at any of these cards, he just pops up anywhere, never saying where he can be reached."

" It's funny, cause he sounds so serious. Official. Like he's in the army or something."

"I know. And he always clearly marks the date." I scooped up the cards and put them back in the envelope.

"What gets me is the way your parents, your Mum just dropped it off like that. As if it was a bomb." Sadie laughed.

"I know. It's weird. Everything to do with my family is weird." I threw the envelope into the closet that was packed full of paper, bottles and cans: recyclable material.

Sadie sat watching me. "Are you bothered by them?"

"No. Just more junk."

But that wasn't the end of the post card story. Like any other event in my life these days, no matter how insignificant, there were always consequences. The days that followed were, at first, like all the other weekdays during my present stint of unemployment. Before getting out of bed,.I would lie waiting until Sadie had left to go to work. Gradually, anxiety would overcome laziness. Sometimes, I'd just roll off the bed, fall onto the floor, even hurting myself, then crawl to the bathroom. I'd only stand up to pee — like a man. After several coffees, I would prop myself up in front of the phone, planning to call up prospective employers, but would then begin to dwell again on what I saw were the real causes for my present predicament. I imagined further escapades (usually sexual), which would jinx or blot out each of the jobs I'd circled in the paper. The whole thing froze me from doing anything. I'd sit transfixed most days in 'the office', the spare

room of our small flat, until Sadie returned at five o'clock to reawaken me.

Sometimes I would shuffle around the apartment, doing odd jobs. As I was sorting out the recyclables to drag them over to the nearby pick-up area, I once again came across the package from my mother. Whenever I did this job, I would often pause to read an old article from a discarded newspaper, so there was nothing significant in my opening the package again and laying out the cards on the floor in front of me. The colours of the older pictures were more vivid, almost lurid, their white card stock yellowing. The newer ones appeared more sedate, the images less tacky. I began to formulate theories about my long lost brother: the range of cards through time seemed to describe a hyperactive mental state gradually settling down: from rich, exaggerated images of bathing beauties and muscle men on crowded beaches, to winsome, misty landscapes, distinctly unpopulated. The handwriting, however, remained unchanged. The same neat, childish cursive on the new white cards matched that of the old yellow ones.

It was as I was turning them all over and arranging them all in front of me, that I found another similarity in the cards. Though they pictured different places, all the recent ones, from about the last ten years on, shared the same post-mark abbreviation stamped under the date. The letters B I R M A L A were equally spaced out in a semi-circle indicating the place of origin. I quickly rifled through the desk drawers for other mail from the States to compare, and found post marks with N Y N Y and N H N J on letters from New York and New Jersey. With the letters L A, I thought at first of Los Angeles, but realized that this had to be the abbreviation of a state. For the first time since receiving the package, I called my mother.

"Hi!" I said, giving her my phony enthusiasm.

"Oh, hello, Jonathan." Her voice was all sympathy. "How are you? How's the job hunt?"

"OK, I guess." I was quickly fading.

"Well it doesn't sound that OK," she said. "That is if you haven't found anything

yet."

"No, but give me a chance. It's tough out there."

"You have to sell yourself. Tell them you're bilingual. That's important."

"But Mom, I'm not." I was forgetting why I called. "Mom, you know the package you dropped off here the other day?"

This seemed to throw her off. "Rick's post cards. Yes?"

"Well, why didn't you stop in?"

"Oh, it was Sunday morning. I thought you two would probably be still in bed." She paused a moment. "And anyway, your father wanted to go shopping."

"So why did you want to get rid of those cards now?"

She paused again. "We just thought you should have them." Her voice changed slightly, as if she was suddenly making a statement. I recognized the switch, and knew that it meant the case was closed. "Your brother never cared much about us, I mean about me and your father." She gave a little laugh. "Obviously he didn't. So I was just cleaning up, and thought you should have them."

"Uh, OK." I felt I could no longer bring up the mystery of the similar post marks. "Well, I guess I'd better get going. I'll call you on the weekend," I said, my usual sign-off phrase.

When Sadie walked in at the end of the day, before she could put the bags of groceries on the table, I fanned out the cards in front of her.

"Where do you think all these are from?" I said, then backtracked. "Look. All these post cards were mailed from the same place." She looked at them, puzzled. "Come on, you should be good at this. Where's B I R M A LA. That's where my brother is living."

"I work at the bank, not the post office." She paused, then said decisively, "Birmingham, Alabama."

I was a little surprised at how quickly Sadie agreed to my proposed trip in search of Rick. She even agreed to pay for part of my bus fare. I had tried the telephone company, but there was no listing of Rick's name in Birmingham. Still, I figured he must be there if that was really where all the post cards were from. Alabama was a three and a half day ride from Montreal with lots of stops and changing buses: New York, Washington, and Savannah.

"Maybe it will do you some good; give you a break," she said, and then, almost under her breath, "Give us both a break," which I pretended not to hear.

But it was true. I latched onto this trip as the one thing that could get me out of the bad luck I'd been stuck in. Because it was a selfless commitment, an action for my family, my brother, it could recharge me, turn me around. I tried to picture Rick's face, doubting I'd recognize him if he passed me on the street. I thought of a time when he was about seventeen, the summer when he kept on playing "God Damn the Pusher Man" by Steppenwolf, over and over. One evening, just as we were sitting down to dinner on a Saturday or Sunday (it must have been a weekend because my father was there), he decided to put it on the family stereo at full blast. My mother turned all red, got up from the table, and walked out the front door. She just left it wide open, so Rick went over and turned up the music even louder, to make it follow her out into the street. My father then jumped up from his chair (it was rare to see him move that fast), and at the same high volume scratched the needle across the surface of the record. Rick just stood there watching him, as if he was being shown something new, like how to light a fire, or set up a tent. And that's how I remember him most — doing bad things, but at the same time looking completely unaffected by them. I felt a certain thrill by being able to watch him do these things, watch the turmoil, but not really be involved by it.

In fact, I soon learned not to get involved. For one time, I told my parents on him for something that he did.. He'd been burning his school books — a thing other kids did at the end of the year, but which my parents didn't allow. He must've been nearing

the end of high school, because he really appeared almost like an adult to me. Anyway, I remember him hiding in my parents' room, and then jumping out as I passed the door, pulling me inside. He held his hand over my mouth like in the movies, and whispered some dire warning in my ear about me ever telling on him again. In the darkened room, I could just barely make out his face in my parents' mirror. He didn't look mad at all. He always had that same look no matter what was going on — when he was having a good time, when my father was giving him shit, even when he was my sponsor for my Confirmation. I don't know how he was given that job — guiding me forward up the aisle of the church, hand firmly planted on my shoulder. All the while, I pictured his face behind me with that same neutral, unreadable expression.

When it was time to leave, I felt strange walking out into the night, as if I was going off to war or something.

"Just don't bring him back here," Sadie said. I turned to her, quite mystified. For a moment I didn't know who she was talking about.

"Your brother. Remember? The guy you're going to see."

"Oh, right!"

"Wait a minute." She rifled through her bag. Finally, she produced a Bell credit card. "Don't overuse it," she said. "Just phone in from time to time to let me know how you're doing."

I took the card and slipped it into my wallet which I kept in the side pocket of my bag. Sadie noticed I'd stuffed all the old post cards in there too.

"What are you going to do with those? Ask people if they've seen someone who writes like this?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just felt I needed to bring along some kind of proof." We gave each other a kiss on each cheek, dry and formal.

"Do not talk to the operator." I read the sign at the front of the bus, from my seat halfway down the aisle. It was a sign I'd seen before on buses as a child, when we lived outside the city, and I'd come in with my mother shopping for new school clothes. I remembered wondering who the operator was. They couldn't mean the driver. There must be some other person in charge; perhaps someone who doesn't appear very often — like Santa Claus or the Holy Ghost.

We were almost out of the city now, the lights diminishing. The seat beside me was empty, free to put my feet up onto, or fill up with junk. I didn't use it, but it seemed to get filled anyway, occupied by an invisible companion. "At this moment, your life is flying apart," it said. "Only the thin shell of the bus is keeping you from scattering all over the highway." I felt I could cry now, that I should cry. On a highway, being hurtled farther and farther away from home, seemed to be the right place for a breakdown. I felt that in the last six months or so I'd managed to push myself off track from everyone else. The view from the bus window seemed to prove this: a never-ending stream of back doors to strangers' houses, the ass end of every town.

After a few hours, the bus shifted down, and turned off the highway onto an exit ramp. There was a sharp, clicking sound. The voice of the so-called operator was crackly, metallic-sounding in the cheap microphone. It seemed to have very little to do with the short, fat man who was driving the bus. "We'll be stopping here for refreshments. Please be back on the bus in 45 minutes." As he got off, he turned on the series of dim lights, allowing the passengers to see each other for the first time. The strangest thing was that each of the series of double seats was occupied by only one person. Like me, everyone was travelling alone. Soundlessly we filed off into the restaurant. But for our bus-load and a couple of waitresses, the large, cafeteria-style dining room was empty. Everyone carried their trays to separate tables, distributing themselves around the room, preferring to stare blankly at one another across the aisles rather than actually strike up a conversation.

I quickly downed my coffee and apple pie, and headed back to the bus. This roadside stop was also a bus depot, and a small group of new passengers was getting on. But as I looked around at the empty darkness in the vicinity of the restaurant, I couldn't imagine where these people might have come from.

Now a small, neat old lady sat perched on the seat next to mine. Perhaps the American apple pie and coffee made me think as I looked at her, "It's the little old lady from Pasadena."

"Sorry," I said, as I stepped over her and the bags at her feet. I noticed she was wearing red shoes — patent-leather shiny. "If you'd like, I could put your bag in the compartment on top for you." After listening to nothing but my thoughts for these past few hours, my voice sounded strange, so publicly polite. The old lady didn't answer at first, but just pressed her lips together in a tight half smile. They were a red that matched her shoes, a striking combination for what otherwise appeared to be a typical, conservatively dressed senior citizen. This single detail, plus the fact that she appeared to be all alone so late at night, made her seem all the more fragile, like painted porcelain. When she spoke , it was a surprise to hear a gruff, pack-a-day smoker's voice come out of her. "You have your bag down here,"she said. It took me a moment to realize that she was defending herself, that she thought I was trying to order her around. All I could think of saying was, "OK. That's OK, then." And as the ride resumed, I simply stared down at the floor, looking at those bright, red shoes, and then at my own — black, turned grey with scuff — disappearing into the grey-black of the bus floor. The red shoes and lipstick was her travel outfit. She, at least, was making an effort to stand out, to continue to exist, while I was in danger of disappearing completely.

Finally, I reached down and pulled out a bunch of the post cards from my bag, then turned on the little reading light above me, creating my own pool of light. As I looked once again at the cards, I tried to picture my brother's life now, what I might find when I got there. He might be leading a completely normal life. Perhaps he's married

with kids. The cards could just be a way of avoiding actually having to reestablish real contact with us, his family.

But the writing, all in the same even hand, seemed to indicate something almost compulsive about them. They were ritualistic. Maybe these cards represented for him the same thing they did for me: something outside of the confusion of our lives. They were hosts, or haloes, bird droppings on a clean, dark suit. In their simple, good intentions, maybe they were his own good luck.

"Boy! You've sure got a lot of cards to mail," the old lady said. "You must have been travelling around a lot." Her voice was so close, and coming out of nowhere, it made me jump a little. I turned to look at her, in the unlit half of the seat. At first, I didn't know what to say, how to explain these five, ten years worth of post cards. I held them up closer to my chest like a careful poker player.

"Yep. I've been travelling since 1972." The old lady turned away. As preposterous as it sounded, I wasn't trying to put her off or make fun of her; I just suddenly jumped into being the person that sent all these cards. Then she looked back at me and said, "That was the year my son got himself killed in Viet Nam." If anything, I was expecting a long series of questions about my own travels; that is, the destinations pictured on all the cards. Now, it looked as if I was in for something else.

"He was nineteen," she continued.

"Then he would have been the same age as me," I said, recalling Rick's age when he left home.

The woman peered up at me, wondering at last, I thought, if I was telling the truth. I reached up and shifted the direction of the reading lamp away from me, allowing its warm glow to include both of us. When she resumed speaking, I could feel her story fall and shape itself around me, like a comfortable blanket, a warm mould. Rather than just listening to the stories of a stranger, I couldn't help thinking that she was telling me about Rick, reminding me of things he'd done when he was still at home, and filling me

in on what happened after. And strangely, I began to experience the sensation that I was growing, physically getting larger in my seat, as if I was becoming the image of my older brother, who had always appeared miles bigger than me.

"He was quite like you," she said. "Always wanting to take off, get out on his own. He wanted to run away and join some commune, or else get a motorcycle, and cross the country. I remember at the time it seemed like the whole country was just tearing itself up. Everyone was so upset about everything. Something would happen in the news, and there would be people out in the streets the next day — either for it or against it. I was always taught that you should support your country, but everyone all of a sudden seemed to want to tear things down. It was like a forest fire that was spreading and spreading."

She stopped for a moment. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess you think I'm getting a bit carried away. By the way, my name is Jeanine."

"Pleased to meet you." I took her small white hand. It felt damp. She was really getting worked up. I felt I should try to distract her, lighten up the conversation.

"That's a French name, isn't it?"

"Yes, Jeanine with a 'J'. Way back, we're from Canada."

"Me too," I said.

She turned and peered at me, squinting. "Yes. You have that French-Canadian look. Dark. That's what reminds me of my son. He inherited the same looks, although I was quite blond."

Then, she dove forward into the bag at her feet, rifling around for what I thought would be old photographs. Instead, she pulled out a pack of Marlboros. I was going to tell her she wasn't allowed to smoke on the bus, but she took a cigarette out and just held it between her fingers while she talked.

"I always remember most that summer before he left to go into the army. Thinking about it afterwards, it was like he was trying to run through his life all at once;

I'm sure a part of him knew he didn't have much time left. Angry, he was. He'd begun that summer with a job. Just a warehouse job as a shipper. He drove his little car out there every day — a car his father had lent him the money for, that he would work to pay back. A little green car, it was, a sports car. I remember he gave me a ride in it once. You sat so low to the ground, your legs went straight out in front of you. He was so excited about it at first, about the car, and the job. But soon, only after a few weeks, he seemed to hate it, to hate everything. He complained about his boss, about the people he worked with, even the other drivers on the way to work. He said they were trying to run him off the road.

"His father, Tom, didn't like the sound of it, and he told me so after dinner one night in the kitchen when I got up from the table to make the tea. 'There's something wrong with that boy,' he said. 'I think he's paranoid.' It was such a strange word for him to use, the kind of thing you hear on T.V., or in the papers. I didn't like it attached to our son, that's why I dismissed it at the time.

"Anyway, he was still working when we went away — Tom and I went to Finland for two weeks that summer."

"Finland?" I said absently.

"Yes. We left the two boys at home to take care of things. Well, when we got back, I remember the place was just a holy mess. Food, dishes, records all over the place. And beer caps. I remember seeing buckets full of beer caps on the counter. They'd been collecting them; proud of how much they could drink. It made me feel strange, this glittering mess— like some kind of gold — fool's gold. Bad luck.

"Well, when we walked in the door, he was nowhere to be seen. Tim, our other boy, was just sitting there with a friend. Apparently he had gone camping, and left Tim with the mess. And it seemed I saw very little of him after that. He was always out. Not working, I know that. He quit the job, just stopped going. I remember being on the receiving end of some nasty calls from his boss wondering where he was. But he always

seemed to have money for his car, when he wasn't running it into the ditch somewhere." Jeanine abruptly stopped her story here. I didn't ask or add anything else, but just reached up and switched off the lamp. She leaned back in her seat, and as she drifted off let her head slump against my shoulder, while mine bumped evenly against the vibrating bus window. I'm not sure if I got any sleep at all, and in no time it was daylight. As for my neighbour, she resumed her story as if only after a slight pause. The only difference was that her already raspy voice seemed to have dropped an octave. She also spoke more slowly, which made the events she related seem solemn and fateful.

"The last thing I recall about him was an incident that happened a couple of weeks before he left for the army." She said the word 'incident' with emphasis, as if it was a word she didn't use very often and demanded special attention. "He had been coming and going, drifting in and out of the house at such odd hours, I couldn't keep track. Tom had given up keeping track. I think he'd given up on him completely. "He'd gone sort of wild — like a plant gone to seed. He'd taken to wearing tight white pants, jeans which were always filthy, and he let his hair get long and tangled. I felt I had no control over him; not only that, I felt he wasn't part of the family anymore. We had lost him somewhere — even though we were all still living in the same house. He was like a different kind of animal who had invaded the nest.

"Anyway, one night Tom and I went into the city to some kind of function to do with his company. We were living in Baltimore then, and it was at the old Windsor Arms hotel, which, I think, has since been turned into a mall. Well, right in front of the hotel was a big park. Although it wasn't really advisable to walk through it at night, we decided to go for a little walk before getting into the car. It was such a beautiful night, and Tom wasn't feeling any pain; I mean, I think we were both kind of looped."

Jeanine paused for a moment, then began again. "Things happened in that park. Even I knew that. I mean, there's a road that circles through it where men drive around slowly. And that's where they pick them up." She paused with this cryptic description.

She seemed to need my consent to continue.

"Girls?" I asked, finally.

"Not only with girls."

I could picture the scene of the story as Jeanine was telling it. It unravelled in my head as she spoke, quicker than her speech. The boy leaning against a tree. The tight white jeans had been cut off to make shorts. He was watching the cars slow down in front of him. Eventually one would stop, and he would get up and approach it. When his parents happened upon him, stopped and looked at him, there wasn't a word spoken. He remained there, staring at them, mesmerized like a deer caught in headlights.

"I still remember his eyes glittering in the dark," she said. "It sounds crazy, but the thing I pictured was those buckets of beer caps on the kitchen counter back home." She stopped for a moment, then her tone brightened, sounding more matter-of-fact, as if she'd suddenly re-emerged from somewhere. "I've come to think that it was inevitable that the war should come along and swallow him up. It was because of all his bad deeds, like bad luck to pay off."

We both looked out the window and watched the morning landscape change abruptly from rural to urban. We were approaching Washington.

"And I remind you of him, do I?" It was a nervous, half-joking question. I expected her to pat my hand and say something like, "No, not in that way." But she didn't. She just smiled a little, and kept looking out the window.

For the rest of the ride into the city, her story, and my imaginings of my own brother's travels percolated inside of me. I once again had the sensation that I was growing larger in my seat. I felt more aggressive, eager to get out of the bus and wander around the city. But my voice still came out quiet and polite. "Where are you headed now?"

"Here. Washington. Among other things, I'm going to look for my son's name on the Wall. It's something I've meant to do for a long time."

"The Wall?" I thought a moment, then realized she meant the Viet Nam

Memorial. I'd seen pictures of it — a long, sleek, shiny stone filled with names.

As we got up to get off the bus (I had to change buses in Washington), my legs tingled from hours of sitting in the same place. I checked my ticket again, and realized I'd have a wait of just over an hour before catching my connection to Savannah. The first thing I noticed was the heat; I was now in the South. Despite being in a large city, the air had a rich, fecund humidity that made me want to get out and explore. Jeanine too seemed affected. Her movements were quick and resolved. She seemed already to have forgotten me. She paused only to light her cigarette, which she'd held all this time, then moved off ahead into the crowd. She soon disappeared forever, without even a wave.

I took my bag from the neat line-up of luggage the driver had created on the oily pavement, and checked it and my jacket into a locker. The Greyhound Bus Depot was in a poor black neighbourhood of Washington. Once I was on the street, I could see the dome of the capital building wavering like a mirage in the distance. Automatically, I began to walk towards it. Between me and this goal, which I would never be able to reach in the hour I had, was an endless series of shabby tenements, pawn shops, and liquor stores.

I still had the impression that I was physically larger than before, heavy, powerful yet sluggish, in this new humidity. My legs pounded the sidewalk like a stalking dinosaur's. I began to slow down, and finally stopped in front of a barber shop. There were a couple of men sitting around inside, a typical, old-time American scene. One of them gave a short, sharp whistle and gestured for me to come in. I hesitated, then came forward, feeling a bit conspicuous, a big white boy.

"Alright," the barber said, brushing off an old, intricate-looking chair. The shop was very grimy; the light coming in was muted with dust, and the unpainted narrow floorboards were spotted with old, dark gum. The polished chair and the barber in his white smock stood out from the rest of the room. I felt I had nowhere else to go than that chair, so I sat myself down. With a flourish, he put the covering sheet over me, attaching

it tightly around my neck. My face looked back at me from an oval mirror hanging on the wall opposite. It was my old face. Nothing had changed. I still had the same glum expression. The look of someone comfortably unhappy — well-fed, but a little dark under the eyes.

"You just come from the bus?" the barber asked.

"I'm on my way to the army," I was experimenting, watching my face say these words, wondering how a 31-year-old could pass as a new recruit.

"Oh well!" the barber said. "We'll get you ready. They say it's good luck to have a haircut before you join up. If I give you a good short cut, chances are they won't cut your hair, which is what they normally do to all the new recruits." He clicked an attachment onto the electric shears. "This way you'll be starting with something that's your own, and that's good luck."

The effect of watching my shaggy, half-way-down-my-ears hair being sheared off was like taking off a disguise. I began to see the self that everyone else would see: the new recruit. Afterwards, as I walked back towards the bus terminal, I could feel sweat trickling down my back from my newly- cropped head. As I walked, I unbuttoned, and then took off my shirt. "Yeah!", I yelled out, a real American army boy.

Still carrying my shirt in my hand, I turned into an army surplus store just before the bus station. "Hey!" A fat, bald man behind the counter was looking at me. "You hafta wear a shirt in the store."

"That's why I'm here." My voice was still loud and aggressive. The man didn't reply, but just kept watching me. I went up to a rack full of khaki t-shirts, found an extra-large, and pulled it on. It seemed the only thing that would fit my expanding chest. I then picked out a pair of shiny black combat boots, and a pair of pants the same colour as the t-shirt. The man behind the counter became more conciliatory, showing me where I could change, asking me if the boots were the right fit. "You may want to leave a bit of room for an extra pair of socks, for when you're out in the field." He tied up my old

clothes in a surprisingly small package wrapped in brown paper and cord. I pulled out my wallet, looking for the dull green of American dollars. I had to finger through my Canadian money and the blue plastic of Sadie's Bell card — remains, archeological artifacts.

I held onto the telephone card, however, and back in the station, took it to the long line of public phones. I dialed home. After several clicks of long-distance adjustment there was a ring. "Hello?" Sadie's voice was the same as always, like my face in the mirror before my new haircut. "Hello?" she repeated. There was no way I could reply. After all my little cheating excursions in the past couple of years, this felt like the worst. I'd crossed the line this time, even though I hadn't as yet touched anyone else. "Jonathan, is that you?" The call display! Obviously the Washington area code, even if Sadie hadn't recognize it, must have given me away. I quickly hung up. I pulled my bag out of the locker, bought some gum at the news stand, and with new resolve, boarded the bus for Savannah.

Although I was one of the first on the bus, I went back automatically to the same place as on the previous ride. Soon, a thin young woman with a small child got on. They paused for a moment as they walked down the aisle. The woman looked directly at me. She smiled slightly, then sat herself and her daughter in the seat just ahead and on the other side of the aisle. She kept turning to look out the window on my side or towards the back of the bus, each time, I thought, giving me the eye. The confident, swaggering persona I'd been imitating really took over now. I slouched down and stretched my left leg out into the aisle. The woman could look straight down at my shiny, new boot. She turned to me and said, "Whew! It's hot, isn't it? Already, and it's only May."

"I guess I'm used to it," I said, slouching a little lower. I let my foot fall to one side, relaxing even more. I pictured the inside of my heavy thigh, smooth and rounded against the taut army cloth.

"You don't sound like you're from the South," she said.

"I move around a lot."

"Are you in the army, or do you just like to wear the uniform?" She smiled. I wasn't particularly attracted to her — a rather long, pale face framed straight brown hair. I was more attracted to myself, the image of myself with this woman who was giving me some attention. She was just a kind of receptor.

"Umm, yeah. They're always sending me somewhere." Absent-mindedly, I touched my chest. My hand found and fondled the nipple through my t-shirt. I stopped when I realized what I was doing.

"Where are they sending you now?"

"Birmingham. To a base just outside of Birmingham," I said.

"And they're sending you there by public bus?"

"Well, I had a little family business to take care of, so I have to make it there on my own steam." I couldn't believe how easily all this was coming out.

"I'm sorry for all the questions," the woman said. "My name is Mary Jane." She reached out to shake my hand. I leaned forward, into the aisle to reach her. "Please, no jokes," she said. I looked at her for a moment, puzzled. "You know. Mary Jane lives down the lane, and all that."

"Oh yeah." I gave her a smile, a gift from my ballooning ego.

"My ex-husband, Jennie's father, is in the army, too." She gestured back over her shoulder towards the little girl hidden behind the tall back of the seat. "They were always sending him somewhere, just like you. At least, that's what he told us." She paused a moment. "Actually, you kind of remind me of him. I guess that's why I kept looking 'round at you." The way she said the word 'actually', the way she stressed it, reminded me of how the old woman Jeanine had talked. She seemed a young version of Jeanine. Smoothed-out, less defined by memories. I, however, was older now, grown from a runaway boy into an army man.

"Is that right?"

"Yes. That same tough look. A rock. Right? I mean, that's what you guys are taught to be."

I didn't reply; I felt I wasn't supposed to reply. I shifted my weight, in a lazy, self-absorbed way, lifting my hips slightly off the seat, jutting my crotch for a moment up in the air.

The sudden sound of the bus motor being started cut the link between me and the young woman. A group of people who had been standing outside, got on hurriedly and filled up the remaining seats. A young man, younger than I, made a motion for the seat beside mine. It would have been easier to simply shift myself away from the aisle to allow the boy to sit down, but that would have cut me off from all contact with Mary Jane. She turned around briefly and smiled as I stood up to let the new passenger into his place. There didn't seem to be enough room overhead for his duffel bag, so he stuffed it as best he could on the floor by his seat. When he finally sat down, he was forced to rest his feet on it, elevating his already large legs into the air.

His face had blossoming acne and a kind of pre-mature moustache, but was big-boned and jowly, giving him a look of strength and resignation. Once we got going, he stared blankly out the window at the scenery as if it were wallpaper. He looked like he took a lot of bus trips.

"You going to be OK like that?" I asked.

The young man quickly turned his head, startled. I nodded at his feet on his duffel bag. "Oh, yeah, I'll be alright." He stretched his thighs to either side, to show that he was quite comfortable. These legs in front of me, so much larger than my own, invaded my space, lazy yet dominant. The army man image I'd built up for myself began to fade. My left leg was still stretched out into the aisle, the shiny boot by Mary Jane's chair still impressive to her, but my right leg seemed to cower beneath the enormous youth beside me. Still slouched down in my seat, I had to look upwards to see the young man's face. He was the real article, a real army boy. The pimples, the mousta[illegible] pale blue eyes all

came together for that lean, mean look. I wanted him to like me, wanted him to be on my side. Otherwise, I'd be old, an enemy of youth, unattractive and desexed. But all I could do was smile up at him — a forced, feeble smile, which probably pinned me down as an old fag.

"Where are some of the places you've been stationed?" I was startled by Mary Jane's voice. My leg, stretched out into the aisle, twitched.

Automatically, I began to recite the names of the places pictured on my brother's post cards. "Grand Canyon, Wakiki Beach, Hollywood, Niagara Falls."

"Ha, ha. Very funny," Mary Jane said. "A real holiday, huh?"

"There ain't no base in Hollywood." It was the voice of the boy beside me, low and serious.

"Just kidding," I said.

"Who's your friend?" Mary Jane called out to me, to us.

I raised my hand in a gesture towards the young man as if to make introductions, but he simply leaned across, firmly placing his hand on my leg for support, and addressed Mary Jane directly. I didn't catch the name, partly due to the noise of the bus and the fact that the young man was facing the other way, but also because of the sensation of his hand on my body. His touch was firm, not accidental, and at the same time completely unaware of me. It was as if he was so used to being close to other bodies, I was like any other object, like the seat underneath me, or the rattling bus itself.

It was almost funny my sitting there, getting completely ignored, while this young soldier and Mary Jane got to know one another. "We're getting off in Savannah," I heard her say. "My ex is from there. We still keep ties with his mum. In fact, we're spending most of the summer there."

"Who's 'we'?" the young man asked. I tried to move my leg a little. The young man's weight was becoming uncomfortable.

"Oh!" Mary Jane gave out a laugh. "I'm with my little girl. She's right here

beside me." She turned and smiled down at the hidden child behind her.

Finally, I nudged him lightly. Perhaps it was the effect of having recited again the names of the places on my brother's post cards, but when the young man turned to me, I was struck by the look on his face. It reminded me of that impassive look Rick always had when he was doing anything — right or wrong. There was also something in the way he touched me. His hand, still planted on my thigh, evoked my brother's hand on my shoulder all the way down the aisle of the church during my Confirmation.

"Maybe we should switch places," I said, a small voice coming from somewhere inside me.

The young man shrugged, but then got up from his place to allow me to move to the window seat. Now my demotion was complete. I seemed to wither inside my new army pants, the way old age curves and shrinks the body. I watched the view out the window, and listened in on the young people's conversation. Mary Jane was telling a story, so it was almost always her voice I heard, punctuated every now and then by a grunt of approval or understanding from the young man. It was actually softer than a grunt, more smoothed out, almost a sigh. I realized that he wasn't really listening, had lost interest now that he had taken over, had won his place.

"I remember all us army wives used to congregate at the laundromat at the base," she said. "That was when we were just outside of Savannah. You must have spent some time at that base, yourself."

"That's where I'm headed right now," the young man said.

"All the wives and their kids. Army brats." she laughed. "It's there that a lot of secrets come out. Dirty laundry."

The point of Mary Jane's story was the infidelity of married army men, and what had happened between her and her 'ex'. By the time she finished, the young man wasn't making any sounds at all. His sleeping body separated me from the aisle of the bus, my access to the rest of the world. I watched as his legs slowly relaxed. The right leg per-

formed a kind of nodding motion, automatically righting itself when it came to rest against my knee. His leg seemed more wary of what or whom it touched then the young man was himself. But this caution soon turned itself off, and the leg became firmly beached against mine. A long time seemed to pass in this way, this big heavy flesh jogging along with the movement of the bus, with me, conscious and silent beneath it.

I moved my hand, white and old-looking, out over the young man's right leg — a plane flying a reconnaissance mission over enemy territory. It hovered, then dropped to within a few centimeters of the round, inner thigh — so close, it could sense the heat there. This was one of those actions, I thought, that I would have to pay for afterwards.

Slowly, I reached in through an open fold in the young man's shirt just above the belt, grasped onto something with forefinger and thumb and removed it. Soft and flattened, the substance I held was identical to my own bellybutton lint. I placed it on my tongue. It had the texture of soft cardboard that quickly dissolved. It took me a moment to figure out exactly what it reminded me of — something I hadn't taken in years — the host. Holy Communion.

The bus shifted direction, putting us in a warm shaft of sunlight. We were travelling in a straight line, allowing the motor to maintain an even unshifting hum throughout the long Southern afternoon. The young man continued to sleep in a confident, unmoving sprawl; in fact, the whole bus seemed to doze off. We stayed in this position until shortly before our arrival in Savannah. As I lay there listening to the motor drone mixed with all the even, heavy breathing of the passengers, I felt as if I was the only one awake. Perhaps even the 'operator' was sleeping. I don't know how many hours passed in this way until a different sound, a murmur from the little girl ahead of us, Mary Jane's little girl, disturbed the mood. I could hear her mother sleepily complain to her, telling her to "settle down". Finally she allowed the child to get by into the aisle. She wanted to go to the bathroom. She passed by our seat slowly, her head turned to look at me. Her round face was like a planet or a full moon. She was just a curious kid, checking out the people

who had been talking to her mother. But to me, in that moment on the sleeping bus, she represented something — a virtue or a vice— as in those old books where Charity or Ignorance is depicted by some poor child in rags or an angelic one in some flighty robes. As she stood there, though she didn't say anything, I felt like she was telling me all my chances were up, used up. My actions had reached the point where they would influence everything else that would happen to me. I was fated; I was a wound-up clock.

"Hello," I said. My voice now was dry and raspy — an old man's voice. She stopped for a moment , then she did a funny thing. She spit on her little hand, and then wiped it on the side of the seat, actually right near my sleeping neighbour's head. Then she turned and kept going down the aisle.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, for the next thing I was aware of was the terminal in Savannah. The seat beside me was empty. In fact, almost all the passengers had already gotten off. I looked down at myself as I stood up, everything lost in the loose and baggy clothing. The volume of my body had disappeared. I had no energy either. As in Washington, there would be an hour's wait for my connection, but I felt that I couldn't stray too far from the terminal, that if I did, I'd never make it back.

I wandered to the street exit where I stopped and leaned against a crumbling cement pillar. The light outside was so intense, I imagined myself standing by an enormous hearth whose fire was pure white. The air shimmered in the heat. I turned back into the cool darkness of the bus station. I felt as if my mind, my reason, was disappearing along with my physical strength.

Someone came over to me. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Birmingham bus" I said feebly. Even the colour of my eyes was fading. I could sense this by the way this person looked down into them, recognizing the eyes of the aged. With a cool, firm grip on my arm, I was led back across the floor of the terminal. As we passed a row of public telephones I stopped. The arm continued to pull at me

encouragingly, but I put up a hand, a finger, and pointed.

With difficulty, I pulled out my wallet from my hip pocket and placed it on the small shelf by the phone. I looked through it for the Bell card. Not finding it in the wallet, I slowly, laboriously went through every pocket in my clothes. To this person who stood by watching my actions must have seemed a little funny, this old, bony figure twitching, frantically searching, patting all the pockets of his absurd outfit. Finally, I retrieved it from one of the lower buttoned-up pockets of my sagging combat pants. The card, like me, seemed to have experienced the ravages of time. Cracked and no longer rigid, it looked like a square of cardboard gone through a washing machine. I had to slowly feed it into the slot on the telephone which barely accepted it. I punched in the half-remembered number, trying to picture Sadie's face. This time, all that came through was the answering machine. Although it must have been my voice on the message, I somehow recognized it as Rick's voice, that mysterious person somehow tied to me, but always far, far away. Perhaps he existed only at a certain distance, like a blurring of heat that disappears when you approach it on the road, and reappears again behind you.

"Where are you?" I asked into the phone — a message for my brother, for Sadie and, I suppose, for myself. I turned slowly away from the phone, which unsuccessfully tried to spit out my crumpled card. I also left my wallet there, and everything in it that identified me.

The helpful person was still there to lead me right up to the bus door. With every step down the aisle in search of my old seat, I felt more and more ancient. It seemed to take me forever to fish through my bag for what I wanted — my post cards. I fanned them out on the empty seat beside me. They would speak for me, identify me. When they found me there, they'd contact the person they were addressed to. They'd call my mother. "All these cards are signed Rick," they'd say. "Do you know of such a person?" Then she'd have to come with my father and perhaps Sadie too, to identify the body of this old, spent man whom, after all these years, all these sins, they wouldn't know.