

The Slideshow and Other Stories

Malcolm Sutton

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in

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of

English

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ABSTRACT

The Slideshow and Other Stories

Malcolm Sutton

The stories of this collection describe and navigate mysterious social relations and the spaces that influence their dramas. Linguistic play and metafictional devices aim to emphasize emotive and intellectual ties to urban habitations, and, moreover, the difficulties in knowing one's or another's identity within these shifty civic milieus.

Verbal slippages confound the vulnerable protagonist of "The Slideshow," leading him to question his own perception and the possibility of knowing the intentions of a love interest.

Buildings enact a central role in "A Positive Piece on Buildings: A Love Story," "At An Architect's Apartment," "The Long-exposure Photograph," "The Prosperity of Walter May," "The Addition," and "The Eight Brightly Lit Windows." In each story, the protagonist is forced to understand the influence of architectural surroundings on his own agency; and alongside these meditations on buildings, he attempts to understand the relationship between himself and an acquaintance, a friend, or a lover.

In "The Asrah Levitation," a mind-altering drug allows the protagonist to shed his inhibitions and confront his relationship to the city by way of viewing it from above.

As images within texts draw attention to a blurry line between fictional and documentary representation, photographs are included in "The Slideshow," "The Long-exposure Photograph" and "The Eight Brightly Lit Windows" to embolden this line. This inclusion does not replicate information within the stories, but rather works in tandem to expose other angles from which the texts may be interpreted.

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The Slideshow

These events apparently happened to me, though I find it hard, as years pass, to believe in that distant self, what he saw, and more, what he heard. Because this story marks a period of dissolution in my life as a student: my learning seemed nothing but the loose threads of poetic deconstruction—if it had been the '50s I would have been caught in nausea and despair, but for me it was all disguised as pleasure in pulling apart the fabric of oneself. I can only conclude what struck me in those days of my early twenties was a result of this unforeseeable convergence of academic theory and lived experience, the chance meeting of books and desire, and a third ingredient that I still can't grasp.

I was studying as an exchange student overseas at the University of D-, on the recommendation of my advisor. It was the first time I'd been away; I felt homesick, but buried my miseries under the gloss of studying in a foreign land. I read ceaselessly for lack of friends. I stayed in a council flat, sublet by a kind but distant old woman from Turkey. Not a bad location, however illegal the sublet was. An hour's walk north took me through a grey neighbourhood of ageing government housing, then by footbridge over the river that bent through the city and to the university. None of my classmates, so far as I knew, lived anywhere near me. I went to parties—when I found out about them—went early and stayed long, sometimes all night, but failed to bond with anyone, as I clung to abstract discussion, safely, without giving anything of myself. I chatted for hours with other drunken students, and during lulls felt awkward having no one to fall on as a crutch. The parties were dull, marred by cliques; no dancing, no centrepieces except for the odd ugly scene or lame confrontation. I felt alien when I opened my mouth, and the partygoers tolerated me.

Therefore when a woman—a girl really, from my contemporary philosophy class—invited me to her house one Saturday evening, I was surprised and excited, nearly blinded by

the suggestion. Her name was Maria. I had not taken particular notice of her until she spoke to me that day. She was calm and her smile was so unselfconscious it transformed her entire person and in turn made my knees buckle and my stomach fold in on itself. Undoubtedly she was from away too, but I could only guess from somewhere Mediterranean. She, I'm sure, could tell that I was from abroad. Which is perhaps why she asked me to come to her house.

At once I began to concern myself with my hair, my clothes, my gait. Hit a barbershop? A stylist? I knew nothing of hairdos and thought even less of them. How would she read a fresh cut? And bring a little offering? Flowers, wine? The problems! Sure, I'd love to come to your place this weekend! But I was shaken senseless; I couldn't even remember if she had said dinner or drinks. For all I knew it was to discuss homework. But it's never to discuss homework. I imagine I thought of nothing but Maria for the four days that elapsed before my visit, that is, if I believed Maria had spoken to me at all.

I arrived in her neighbourhood by subway. As I was several minutes early I ducked inside a corner store and browsed magazines, looking time and again at the clock over the counter. I bought a bottle of wine and realized that my indecision over the previous days might have left me with an inferior choice, but I didn't know one wine from another anyway. When a few minutes had passed beyond our meeting time I left the store and walked the half block to her house.

It was an old, semi-detached red brick house with a well-kept flower garden, a man's bike locked to the porch. The sun was down, though it was still early. The air was of fall semester, the kind that affects academics.

The door was answered by a pretty woman in her fifties. "You must be L-," she said graciously, casting me into the schoolboy I already imagined myself—and how boyish I must

have looked, flooded by a jacket, shoulder pads protruding and undoubtedly making my neck seem skinnier than it already was. “I’m Maria’s mother,” she said. “Barbara.”

“Hi, pleased to meet you.” We shook hands.

“Come in, come in. Maria will be right down.”

I left my jacket in the foyer and carried the bagged wine with me through the living room into the dining room. Framed prints decorated the walls: Renaissance markets and piazzas, a portrait of a harlequin, a cornucopia still life with grapes and wheat, an Arcimboldo face composed of books. The sweet smell of chicken baking saturated the room and heated the air.

“Something smells good,” I said to Barbara, imagining now that I had been invited to a large dinner, one that would commence shortly. I felt hungry.

She smiled and went into the next room from where the smell came—what must have been the kitchen. Upstairs were many voices.

I pulled out the bottle of wine and put it beside a bowl of nuts and a bowl of mandarin oranges on the dining room table. The table wasn’t set. I wondered then if this was a family dinner I’d been invited to, or whether Maria and I might eat in her room or in some den downstairs. I hadn’t foreseen chatting with parents, or answering questions about myself posed by the older generation. Now I became nervous at the thought of explaining or even justifying my studies. So why exactly did you cross the ocean to study the fractured self? Then I heard steps.

Maria appeared in a grey dress with white lines tracing her hips and shoulders.

“Maria,” I rose to say hello.

“I’m so glad you’re here. Who let you in?” she asked.

“Your mother, Barbara.”

“Good, you met her then.”

“Who else is here?” I asked.

“Plenty of people. My father. And a number of our relatives and some friends.

Everyone is upstairs. You should come meet everyone.”

At that moment a large man entered the room.

“I was wondering where that other male voice was coming from. You must be L- .”

He spoke with an accent I couldn’t place and I put my hand in his.

“You’ve come just in time,” he said. “We’re about to begin the slideshow.”

“Follow me,” Maria told me.

I followed her upstairs to a large open room filled with adults. Maria introduced me to each person. They were all friendly. The women smiled at me as if I’d done something cute, but I simply leaned over and quietly shook hands. The men greeted me. Some were drinking. A screen was pulled ready.

Maria found a place to sit on the carpet and I joined her.

Her father entered, then put his hands together. “Hi everyone,” he said. “Hello there!” he shouted. “Welcome, if I haven’t had a chance to say hello. I hope everyone has wine or beer, or water. I hope you’re ready to see the show. Summer holiday. Part vacation, part food tour. But I’m sure you all know. Can someone hit the lights?”

I have to interrupt the story here—if it is a story—to make a few comments. The breakneck pace at which I was shuttled around the house upon arrival had left me sweaty along my back and under the arms. I was a little disoriented, even dizzy. Slightly panicky. I may have skipped lunch that day for my stomach rumbled, making me self-conscious. I was indeed hungry. In short, I was in no condition for what followed. When the lights went out and the projector illuminated the screen I stole a look at Maria. Her face was so young. I

could see she took after her father. His nose, his mouth. We were shoulder to shoulder, closer than we had ever been, and this closeness was intensified by the group silence. I felt the rise and fall of her breathing, still heavy from running up the stairs. I wondered if our hands, as we leaned back on them, would slide towards each other, or brush up against the other while adjusting our posture. My face flushed but surely went unnoticed by relatives and friends of the family in this artificial light.

The pictures below, that accompany the story, are clearly not the same as those Maria's father showed that night. These are merely to give a sense of what he showed, as he told the story of their summer holiday. As for Maria's father's words, I've done my best to represent them accurately.

"As a preamble, just let say that I was a bit of a fool," Maria's father chuckled. "For whatever odd, aberrant reason, I didn't buy film for my camera until the final day of our holiday. In fact, this day was not planned for at all. Our flight was cancelled, leaving us stranded. Not unhappily so, but stranded nonetheless. With nothing planned we meandered through the old city, in places familiar to us from our stay there. We drifted and loafed about in a carefree manner. In short, we didn't know what we were doing; we had no expectations at all. I began taking pictures of everything, as if to document this day—what we came to call 'the extra day.'"

Cli-click.



“As is so often the case, the first photo is a timid one, from a distance. It was morning. The three of us, Barb, Maria and I, strolled about the square, a square we’d been through a number of times, but this time we felt—I should say *I* felt, I can’t speak for Barbara or Maria—as though I was seeing it in a different light. The weight of limited time had lifted from my shoulders. An extra day! A youthful excitement filled me! An extra day, ha ha! I noticed a girl balancing at the edge of a fountain, carrying boxes in her hands. That’s how I feel today, I thought and snapped a shot. Look at that: that girl has poise/pies.”

Cli-click.



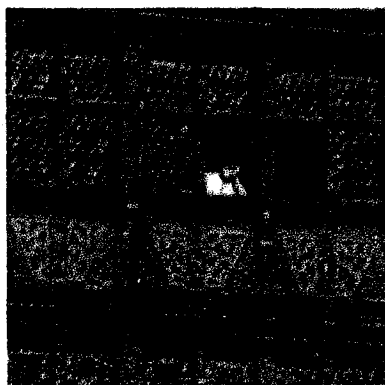
“This picture was a sweet accident—serendipity stepped in, you might say. I was focusing my lens on this little dog, just for the fun of framing a shot, when, in taking a reading, I pressed the button too firmly and the shutter went. So this guy became the subject of my picture. Then I took greater notice of him. I’m fairly certain I saw him earlier on, a few days prior, dining in the hotel restaurant. A fine restaurant at that. He was at the table beside ours. I remember that he, if it was him, had raised a stink about the temperature of the angel-hair pasta he’d ordered. ‘Oh, but it’s cold,’ he said. ‘Cold noodles. They’re cold!’ He refused to touch it. The waiter returned with another plate, and this time this man ate it with veal/zeal.”

Cli-click.



“Pigeons and bicycles. Our holiday was so textured by pigeons and bicycles. But I hadn’t really noticed them until our extra day. They were a quiet backdrop. Pigeons always look good in photographs. And bicycles always look good in photographs too. Somehow they remind us—I should say, somehow they remind me—of a civic ideal. An international dream, wouldn’t you agree? They remind us of old style commerce, buying and selling, haggling. People pawning things from stalls and baskets. They remind us of the old square itself! Had I asked Maria and Barb to stand there in the frame, you wouldn’t even notice the bike and pigeons. But I don’t know where they were. Here we have just the pigeons and bike—I’ve made the background the subject. Evidently the boy in the slide pushing the bike around saw me take his photo. He approached me. I couldn’t understand his accent well, but it was clear he was trying to sell me a little packaged snake/snack from his basket. I told him no thanks. So much for your old style commerce! So much for my civic virtue.”

Cli-click.



“Oh! I have to tell you it’d been a while since I’d used my camera. Again I was practicing my focus, pointing away from people after that boy on the bike solicited me. Again I accidentally took a picture, but this time my finger became nervous when I was focusing on this decorated wall and this guy popped his head into a window. Why did I put this one in the show, you might ask. Well, all of a sudden he began waving a white handkerchief out the window, as if to get someone’s attention. Then he began moving his arms about in a semi-regular rotation. You have to understand I was quite far away, but could see him well enough to be intrigued. I thought, is this guy busy/dizzy? I didn’t know whether to be concerned. But he disappeared. Every once in a while I looked back at the window, but soon I forgot which one he had appeared in.”

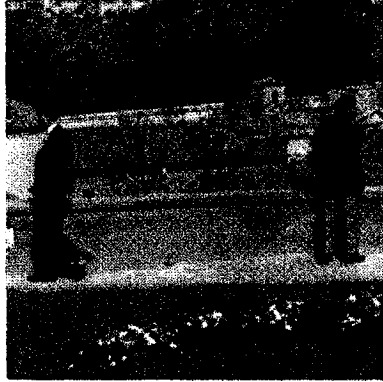
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“Time seemed to melt away on the extra day. It was a waking dream, windless and steamy. Soon it was time to have some lunch, though from what I remember, none of us had a great appetite. Well but we needed to eat. Like many others we found ourselves at a café under large parasols. While waiting to be served I noticed a scene not far off that was more or less the mirror image of our own. A café table, a parasol, etc. How funny, I thought at the time. The woman at that other table even wore a similar skirt to Barb’s. And the man appeared to have a camera not unlike my own. I began to wonder whether they might even eat the same lunch as we would! Well my speculation proved wrong. I don’t remember what

they ate. But we had a pleasant, light lunch, a salad, finely chopped, and tapas. I remember afterwards I had pushed myself from the table and was leaning back, satisfied, when I looked up at the sky and was momentarily blinded by the sun, then looked around and saw there was a speck, like a small black raven/raisin floating through the air. I tried to get it on film, but missed the opportunity.”

Cli-click.



“After lunch we took a stroll to a place we’d discovered a few days earlier. Undoubtedly I wanted to go there, thinking of the picture I would take. There was a magnificent view. When we arrived I noticed an unusual boy in a tree—the same tree I had remarked upon the first time we’d been there. By a wall I saw two men talking with their hands—those men in the slide—seemingly unaware of the view of the old city. I walked closer to the boy, while keeping my eyes on these two men. Their voices elevated, and their discussion crescendoed in an exchange of harsh words. The boy, who was also watching, looked worried, as if he understood the repercussions of the argument. He then began to clam/climb up. The two men parted, but not before one of them—the one on the left—shouted at the boy in the tree. Only then did I notice the placard in the boy’s hand. It had an arrow on it. Had he planned to point it at the men? Only then did one of the men—the one on the right—look severely at me, provoked perhaps by the camera, and said, ‘Don’t you worry about the kid. He likes to ham/hang it up.’ And the boy hid his placard.”

Cli-click.



“A few minutes later I heard a kaffuffle, and a crowd gathered by the short barrier that edged the panorama. Something was happening in the city below. I think Maria and Barb had wandered off in another direction, so I approached the onlookers on my own, and took this picture. All went quiet, then at once everyone gasped and the air was filled with laughter. Within moments the crowd dispersed, and couples went off chuckling to themselves. I realized what a fool I was, having stopped to take a picture, then having missed whatever high comedy had transpired. Again I was a fool! I noticed a woman who lingered alone by the wall, and approached her. I asked her what had happened that was so funny. Her response was mild/wild and I could get nothing out of her. I could see she needed to be left alone, so I didn’t press for more information. In the distance I saw Barb and Maria standing in the shade of some trees. I joined them. Maria said she wanted to go down to the beach.”

Cli-click.



“There were not many people on the beach, because of the time of day or maybe the strange air that hung about. I saw these two men. One was crouched down with just his bathing suit on and looked to be forming mounds in the sand. The other man, dressed in a shirt and shorts, not far away from the first, was having tremendous difficulty lighting his cigarette. Either from the erratic gusts of wind or perhaps his lighter being out of fuel. The two men, so close in proximity, were in different worlds. I took a picture. Maria, I seem to recall, told me I shouldn’t indiscriminately take pictures of strangers, but I didn’t think these guys would mind. They didn’t notice me anyway.

“We walked along the beach. Again Maria and Barb wandered off as I stared away at the waves. When I looked for the women I could only see Barb. ‘Where’s Maria?’ I asked her when I caught up. ‘Oh, she’s gone off. She’s been out in the sun and fresh air too long. I think she’s going to supper/suffer.’ ‘You’re probably right,’ I said. Barb and I took in a little more of the sea and returned to the piazza.”

Cli-click.



I glanced at Maria and she looked into my eyes and smiled. I thought of Maria’s father with his...his what? His accent? Was it an accent? Where was he from? Was it something else, some deliberate muddling? A game? A slippage? How happily he went on as if transported to that extra time, that distant place. I couldn’t take it. I wanted to rush out of the room, but I was too timid. I tried to rationalize the situation. Had Maria’s parents asked

her to invite a guest? To invite me? But to what end? To the end that my delicate self was completely disrupted, disconsolate, on the verge of trembling and suffering muscle twitches.

I asked myself simple questions. What was I doing there? Of course Maria had invited me, but why? I knew why I had come, simply because she'd asked me, because of her smile and because of prospects of knowing her better. And dinner? Chicken?

The show continued another half hour. I made efforts to block Maria's father from my mind—by concentrating on the breakdown of an essay I was working on for school—but the effect only worsened when I consciously attempted this diversion. His voice grew louder and clearer; it was like a feverish nightmare as his words and my own thoughts commingled. I let my hand touch Maria's, thinking I might shock myself into avoiding his words. She looked at me and smiled, but withdrew her hand.

Her father finished talking and the lights came on. The slideshow was over. Maria turned to me and asked, "So, what did you think of our extra day?"

"Strange and wonderful," I said, almost fainting as I stood. But it was true. Despite the torment her father had put me through I couldn't help but cling to this idea of an extra day. How it appealed to me, how strong its presence in these photos, its neither here nor there-ness, how elegant in its challenge to reality.

"Oh, but my father overstates it, this ideal of an extra day," Maria said before excusing herself.

Everyone had more to drink, and I had a glass. The jovial atmosphere made me believe everything was okay, even normal. I was even beginning to forget the slideshow and think what to do next. I looked for something to snack on but there was nothing, so I stood near the group where her father was talking. It seemed they were discussing plans for dinner.

I realized I was still hungry—always a good sign, a positive response. “The cook/Coke is in the kitchen,” I heard her father say.

I left the room and went into the hallway, expecting to run into Maria. I passed a few minutes there fearing one of the guests would apprehend me or ask me questions about my studies. Then Maria appeared. “L-!” she said. “What are your plans now?”

“I was going to ask you the same question,” I replied. “I overheard talk of dinner...”

“Oh. Really? Perhaps they’ve decided to go out. I was thinking maybe we should go for a walk.”

“I could use the air,” I said.

Out on the dark street I felt a little better and thought I’d try to take control over the situation. Maria took my arm. “Maybe we should go for a bite,” I suggested.

“Which way do you live?” she asked.

“There, across the river.”

“Let’s go then.”

We walked and walked. She told me as a child she grew up in several countries; her parents were always on the move. I asked her why that was the case and she looked at me as if she’d never wondered why before.

“Well what does your father do?” I asked.

“He’s an interpreter. He does live translations of court cases. The back and forth questioning, the deliberations.”

I wanted to ask her more about her father’s voice, his oscillations. I wanted to ask her about the chicken baking away. But there we were, clinging to each other as we now raced towards my apartment, the situation too tentative to pose disruptive questions. In just half an hour we’d be there.

Again I must halt this story. I haven't even false photographs to back up what happened next, pictures which more than likely would write the end better and be more truthful, paradoxically, in the way they would blatantly mislead. The drop that made the glass overflow, that made me radically change my course of studies upon return home, had already fallen somewhere amongst the slides, yet I doubt I felt its full import until this final frame, until this extra little tag.

"What are we going to do when we arrive at your apartment?" she asked.

I thought of the old woman I lived with. I looked at Maria whose mouth resembled her father's. I felt the pit of my stomach and the anxiety of words and days.

"There's little at my apartment," I said. "A narrow kitchen, two bedrooms, no living room. Did I tell you about the Turkish woman I sublet from?"

At the footbridge we began crossing in silence. Something told me Maria would slow midway and say she could go no further. But she didn't. We carried on happily. Did I myself slow and ask her if she wanted to continue? No, I had to keep quiet, not say a word while we crossed the bridge. It was a passage that went on and on, for certainly she would halt, I thought, or at very least mouth a word or two, slur or trip before leaving the far side of the bridge. But it seems it wasn't until we reached my front door that she hesitated.

A Positive Piece on Buildings: A Love Story

I haven't put myself, in order to write my letter, in a postcard setting like the Olympic Stadium, Beaver Lake, the café in the Musée des Beaux Arts, or in an otherworldly project like Île Ste-Hélène—places I've never gone—nor have I dug out a packet of linen paper and purchased a pen running with new ink. I couldn't. A new place looms with distraction. You stare at the women and dolled-up men, and the unusual loner who carries a grocery bag of writings. The tickles of the brain, the anxiety and personal business that you bring with you, these fall second to the novel things that surround you: the tessellated tiles, the metallic spray paint on the pressed ceiling, confusion at the counter, letting people by, competition for seats, the heart-to-heart at the next table or televisions illuminating corners. You're witness to all your not-knowing—how the new place functions, whether to order at the counter or whether you'll be served, whether to leave your bag at the coat check, whether you maybe should've lugged a camera, whether you need ID and a bank statement for entry, or perhaps a tie, closed shoes, or more deliberate posture. Just today I was turned away from a church bazaar for being a few dimes short of admission. The woman at the desk looked at me as if I'd stolen the goods merely by peering past her table.

In the Métro? Why, what's more tear-jerking than letter-writing in a station. I learned the hard way, by going down. A crowd, then a smattering of people, continual departures, hurriedness, waiting, public lovers, but worst of all, the soft whirr of deceleration—the sound of a breath vibrating closed teeth—whenever a train arrived. Familiarity mixed with strangeness: the strange always mingles in as an unwanted visitor, the familiar always mingles in as a song. I left the Métro as soon as I arrived, having paid to go nowhere. I write from the street—my routes—as a word or two strikes me, as I see something, from the lobby of the Library Building at the university where there's nowhere to sit, where you have to lean

on dividers crested with fake plants. You might ask what I was doing there, other than writing this, since I should be done with school by now. I got a summer job. A stunted income cleaning up, mopping the floor of the library and the visual arts department, working off-hours, working extra hours like a tired phantom. This is all to explain a question or two you might be asking yourself, which is the purpose, I imagine, of this letter.

But I began writing it when I moved into my new place four days ago—I almost started it with ‘dear’—I heard a horrible sound: the beating of a heart under the cement floor. It came and went, it comes and goes. I’ve been staying away during the day as much as possible and I’ve been trying to wear myself out, working and wandering so that at night I’m less sensitive to the beating. It goes away, then comes back again.

How’s the view? The couple across the street and down from me on the third storey—their building goes only to three, you recall—don’t draw their curtains, they must love their view too. Their living room brightly lit, even in the daytime, as if to say let everybody in. I see their hardwood floor and plants, and at times their legs and feet, bare. To distract myself from the sound I watched them conversing by the window. They talked at length, they stared across to this building and made gestures at it, pointing here and there, so that I wondered what they were saying. Probably something plain like will the building ever stop?

Am I really interested in buildings? You think four years of study would have shaken it out of me? *Do I actually love them, say, as much as books?* Yes, as much as books, probably more, but there are loves, not just *a* love, many loves. Any layman will tell you there’s no need for comparisons between any two loves, and he’ll provide plenty of examples and suggest no need for further consideration of the topic. But how could I love books and buildings equally? Walls and words, mortar and print—equals only in analogy. What Hugo said of the ageing cathedral—a book being more durable than it. Well the Cathedral’s still there, and still

a cathedral. Such a question is for dreamers, and otherwise always deferred to difference and variety—the dictionary and the library are equals in such eyes—a paperback, a tent; a manual, a plaza; a flipbook, a stairwell. I haven't read a thing in the new place, I can't, I haven't broken it in, I haven't the concentration. The building's making sounds. *Do I actually love them?* Yes, but I know you're asking something simpler and more pointed, potentially stinging. You are asking whether I like buildings or whether it is the pictures of them, the writing, the blue of blueprints, the abstract and absurd steps of manifestos. Is the love legitimate in other words? I love them all, the pictures and scribbles, each one, but the real thing more, the stone and cement. Before I moved in I was beginning to think that buildings have souls, and now . . . Or—you wonder whether my love of buildings is like a love of sunlight, a warm feeling on the skin, lending calm when all else has lit out to Bedlam, or whether it is like fire, heating from within like a heart. This is simply a question of love. To which you might answer, I once understood your loves.

What do I see? The first thing I did when I stepped in was try the windows. They are upright like French doors, leading as if on to a balcony, but there's just a rail so that I don't fall. Once or twice I've leaned out and handled the rail and looked over the three storey walkups, uninterrupted but for the odd highrise, and of course the mountain. You think they would've added a balcony. It's so obvious, we'd imagined it so many times. Anyone who lived here before could have told them, add balconies. None of the new windows is cracked anymore and there's no spray-foam lining to keep out the cold. None is closed with plywood, there's no chicken wire to block pigeons, there's no cooing of pigeons at all. The whole picture has changed. The pigeons seem to have been completely eradicated sometime, likely recently. But I've been here only four days and it's been rather hot; they might return.

How's the view? Dark. No, not truly dark. It's night and though I've curtains, light comes up from the street and down from the clouds. And as cars drive by they light the room with their ephemera.

Do I know that others know I like buildings? As sure as his eyes are brown he loves them, as sure as blood runs through his veins.

Have I gone to see the Grande Bibliothèque? The gates haven't opened yet. But yes, I have stuck my brow and hands up on the new plate glass and looked inside and imagined the sound of heels—not echoing, the walls being absorbent—as administrators walked by. I look forward to going there after it's been worn a few months by street people who need the washrooms. Dust needs to settle in the stacks, on books no one reads; it needs regulars to find their spots automatically. *Have I bought a sandwich at the Restaurant in the middle of Parc Lafontaine?* No, it's never open. Maybe in the middle of the summer, for a race day, when runners bend and collapse across the finish line. Or when a junior orchestra mobilizes the nearby stage, but never for skaters in the dead of winter. Never for fall lovers or for children on Sundays. Never for individuals reduced to paper by some circumstance. I've pressed my face against the windows and seen the stacked chairs and tables. It's spacious and bright inside. It looks so quiet. I can imagine a rendezvous there—with you at the table, straight-backed and dark-haired, saintly, ready to imagine artistic projects and ready to let me know how I've gone inwards, how I've gone inside, how I've become unrecognizable, monstrous—but I told myself I wouldn't spill fantasy on these pages, even to sketch a tiny moment. Yet the Restaurant's 'closed' sign appeals, it calls for a made-up scene. Because it's city-run it doesn't need to compete to stay afloat, and therefore it bobs like a sealed jar, plumb in the park. I've considered breaking in just to sit by the dusty counter and eat a moist sandwich, even to curl up overnight. But the locks are institutional quality.

How's the view? Since you called the time-out I've come to realize how the mind operates on fantasy as much as reality. The unreality is this: that a relationship can be left in suspension and meanwhile we can relax and feel the sea breeze of time *without*, and somehow while apart we might measure how much we like each other—more, less, the same—or see from our new shore the island we were stranded on. But we kept moving during our time-out, and move even now. What with momentum, how could we not? I imagine you reading this letter, on a balcony, or more likely in some public place, a place I've rarely or never ventured (you must have changed your routes to avoid me—this could be a new field of studies, detours and changes of routes following break-ups), having remembered it in your bag where you'd stuffed it on the way out the door.

Do I really love buildings? How about model suites? Well I must tell you about the model suite, you would have hung yourself over it. Have you heard this nonsense they talk about of non-spaces, like the terminals at airports, hotel lobbies, the sodded grounds surrounding chemical parks, even the party rooms of condos? Well model suites are the ultimate non-space. A walk-in ad. Ideal for no one. No dream, no reference to anyone's life. It's funny to consider this from five flights up in my new condo. There's not a trace of us in those bone-dry beams and blasted bricks. There's no spilled beer, no you and me sandwiched between sheets, no dressing up in each others clothes, no Scrabble, no books, no party music. Just the terrible rhythmic sound that seems like something from the past. If only the architect had been one of the school who thought citation to be the new moral high ground. How to embody within the condo the old warehouse and the ones who lived here, he would ask. What he would have uncovered of the remnants of our life together, how he would have angled the corners to reflect our petty politics! I'd have put a fountain in the centre with a statue of a little bogart or gargoyle spouting water from his eyes. But do they

really think the past can be cited, embodied in a conversion project? A wiser man said that space is always saturated, no matter what kind of architect wins the project, no matter how fierce the gutting. Which means somehow you're still here despite your change of perspective.

How's the view? Not as it was. You may remember the interior we constructed with a gallery in mind, and the kitchen onto the entrance, an almost invisible bedroom and the modular counters and cupboards for easy rearrangement, for serving beer, a little spot for the espresso machine. The guests stepped in lightly to begin—well, they were friends to begin, too—as if walking through a delicate construction site, and as the months accumulated they stepped more heavily and they were more like invaders. We finished the corners and edges were sealed. Of course it is all gone, not a trace of the work we lent the loft. Not a trace of the thing we built together, our ideal project, the thing we built and built and built.

Do I still get money from back home? How much money is in my bank account? You were always worried about my having a job for the future, I know. You ask me how do I survive. Well all you need to know is that I didn't steal any cash, I didn't take anything from your purse. *The down payment?* All my own money. At a certain age you have to own a piece of land, a property, you must be able to affect space. A man's home is his castle. A creature of habit lives there. I could rent no longer. I had to buy.

Why should my love of buildings present the most fundamental problem, why should it present despair? A tragedy, maybe, because you met me when I was living in the present, at my height of heights, showing a carefree glow, a proud posture, a strut. But owning a condo is no baseline. I haven't hit rock bottom. Owning a condo isn't like being on a binge or washing yourself once a year or driving a car for a living. Owning a condo isn't the kind of

dependency that destroys your liver, wastes your eyes, bursts your eardrums. It's renting that's the curse. You feel the blocks of a palace on your back. You see the rent money disappear into the walls and seep into the floors. Renting is a sentence that doesn't end. It's the Great Wall. It's generational. Renting's the burden that will bend your spine, not the purchase of a condo.

Ah, there is a mission statement in the mezzanine. It all comes together in the line, "Remember this building was once a chewing gum factory."

To think I chained myself to the steam pipes to protest our eviction, just as a gesture. I know, there was no lock. Instinct told me to do this. Already we were moving boxes into our next apartment, knowing we had failed, moving in to the third storey of a walk-up where there was nothing to do but settle our things in place.

At the counter of the bookstore, when I was selling all of my books, when the bookseller had gone through them, consulted his catalogue—I know that was the turning point. You found the bookshelves emptied, cleared like a liquidation of my life. From there it took little to imagine all your things gone and moved elsewhere. You thought only a helpless creature sells his book collection, firstly because the returns are miserable, and secondly, only someone who imagines himself utterly void of a future sells the trade paperbacks, the OED, the rare slang thesauruses, the expensive art catalogues and MIT publications, and, oh, the oversized annotated art books. Utterly void of a future, you thought. Or creeping towards the future as if it were a cave. Turning point, but not the moment. The moment looks more like this: you and me standing by the window in our new apartment. You ask me, How does the view look? And I answer, I liked the old fifth storey better.

Do I ever get a bad tickle living in my new place? I had considered a small mobile home, either an old school bus or a stretched van. I had considered a tent and other nomadic furniture like cardboard recliners. But I prefer to be stationary. In one place. In our old haunt, as is. I suspected from the day I stepped in, breaking the seal of my purchase, that my own heart had somehow come to be buried here. Then I realized it was your heart which pounded here. But yesterday, as I painted one of the walls a familiar light green, I realized it was the building: the sound of a pump from renovation continuing in the basement. These renovations take months to complete, so I think I'll stay away as much as I can. I don't like the sound. It won't let me be.

At an Architect's Apartment

I recently had reason to go to Z-, and so before leaving I mentioned this to my friends and acquaintances, partly as an inquiry into who might be living there. I soon heard that someone who I hadn't thought of in years had set up shop in Z- as an architect. It was a pleasant surprise, as I was unaware that he'd pursued architecture or was even fond of buildings. I asked a few of my older friends, friends from the time we were in secondary school together, if they knew anything of his present life. He worked on plazas and the occasional private assignment, I was told. He ran a firm of three members that was failing, I was told by someone else. The variety of facts which emerged seemed not to cohere into one life but instead produced an image of many, leaving me with a sprawling personality that I could not fathom. Yet I tried to force the facts into the portrait of one person, simply so that I could imagine him. One friend was surprised that he'd finished his architectural degree at all rather than following his longstanding interests, which were botany, theosophy and naturalism. According to another friend he worked on grand projects, one that lasted years and saw the death of its contractor; another which he built from a 17th century plan that had not originally seen a foundation. At one time he worked distributing flyers for an organization, a cultish sounding society, I heard from someone else. The talk made me weary of everything I heard. There were comments on his character as well: that he was always with a new girl, that he liked to play the field; that he'd had a problem with alcohol, or maybe his liver, at one time; that he'd suffered a head injury which lead him to temporary amnesia, or possibly it was aphasia; that he was the drummer in a rock band, a band that was not bad; that he was well-endowed (it was strange who said this to me); that he was a great chess player and, in the same breath, a cyclist. I imagined him as I knew him several years ago, not tall, a bit of a delinquent. In hearing this random, not especially telling and in some

instances disparate information over the course of a few days, I was affected by the strange community he gathered: two former girlfriends, my accountant, some soccer enthusiasts from the café I frequented, others who I would say hi to on the street or at parties, without remembering how we began the pleasantries, some whom I associated with different cities I had lived in, who had grown bigger, greyer or wealthier. It sent me measuring my own life against the past, as one is forced to do when faced with stale, discontinued or breached friendships. It was perhaps the first time in my life when I used this yardstick against time, this destroyer of illusions, and it revealed to me more than anything else how far the past was from the present. A chain of unstable jobs had led me to return to my home city, and led me to my present occupation, which happened to be the least stable and structured of them all; this occupation which was now leading me to Z-. But my self-reflection fizzled away and with it this imagined community, for there wasn't really anything binding it together, except my unexpected sensitivity.

For several years I have been attracted to architects and especially talking to them about their likes and dislikes, their adulations and irritations. They express concern over things like the transparency of glass and the movements columns provoke in the bystander's eyes. Concerns, I should say, so far from my own, and truly funny to all outsiders—professional concerns are often humorous for their specificity and their distance from everyday thinking. Green tint or brown? Polished or rough? Thank God those are not my problems, I thought, and yet I like to hear about them. Where should the front door be? I like to further provoke them by asking abstract questions on how structure changes the direction of a walker through a building and even emotions of people who step into it. I also enjoy visiting architects' apartments, or, if they are more successful, their houses. But I don't meet many people lucky enough to be in this profession. After I googled him and found out a few more

details of what he'd been up to—the most significant being that he won a national prize to build a public sculpture, no small feat for a thirty year old (in the times we inhabit)—I contacted him. He was surprised to hear from me, in fact the first minute of our conversation was marred by my having to repeat my name, and add my surname and add our previous connection. Thereafter he was gracious and said that he'd be out of town precisely when I was there, but that if I wanted to stay, I would be welcome to his apartment. “For an old friend,” he said as well. “It *has* been a great number of years,” I replied. His voice was not as I remembered—smooth and light—but instead rather rough, not raspy, but aged, and inflected with a surety that comes from hashing out ideas on a regular basis. He really took hold of the conversation. When he explained that he'd been working as an architect, I told him, “Oh yes, that's what they tell me.” I asked him what was his favourite kind of building. I was hoping for a castle or a skyscraper or perhaps a new university library. It was kind of a joke. Nothing puts a person on the spot like a question such as this one; I've noticed that, more than ever, people hate to exclude possibility. He hummed and hawed—the simplest question also being the most difficult to answer—and then I tried to let him off the hook, but he wanted to answer and so I sent him a chuckle to let him know it was a joke, but he persisted. Then he expressed a rather half-hearted excitement over a new housing development in the industrial area of the city. There was something else he had wanted to say, which he began to say, then changed his mind. He would leave a key with his neighbour Lara. Now I was disheartened, knowing that I would not meet him, and that we wouldn't be able to catch up.

His name, which I had given little thought to in the past, now struck me as I sat down to consider our conversation. Gus Trachtadec. But in full, as you might read it on the internet, Gustav E. Trachtadec. I had always known him as Gus, and since our acquaintance

formed in secondary school, I had never considered his last name. Now the name's staccato movement made me speak it aloud, for myself to hear as it resounded in my office. Gustav E. Trachtadec. It turned at each syllable, the 'tav', the 'E', the 'tr', 'ta' then 'dec', a right angle, around a hard corner, like a skeletal construction made of iron. But the letters weakened as I pondered them; something seemed fabricated. I thought about the name for probably 15 minutes, maybe half an hour, leaning in my chair, staring out the window. Was it a name at all, or a strange fabrication? But then I let it be, as it was.

Architects show their fears, I thought a few days later as I drove past the tourist information chalet of the bordering province, more than anyone else in their creations. More than writers, certainly. More than writers who need to hold their audience's attention for as long as possible. More than writers who exaggerate and role play and in addition allow themselves multiple voices behind which they hide. Architects' fears show substantially, are cut into slabs and poured into foundations. They're set in vitrines and hidden in backdoors, in vestibules, elevated to third storeys, fifteen storeys and skylights, put on display in glass skins, in funeral parlors and seniors homes, and tourist information centres—these sad A-frames surrounded by a strip of pines. Nowadays architects flaunted those fears in precariously slanted or cascading walls, as if to say, it could fall! It's not so permanent as it may seem! Time will drop these walls or turn them to dust! You can't physically be surrounded by a writer's fears. Only impressionistically so. Now I foresaw his apartment telling me so much about him in his absence.

The neighbourhood was not as I'd expected, nor was the building occupying his address. Despite my vision of a successful architect's house, which I knew to be misguided, I had no trouble finding Gus' apartment. Still I pictured a centrally located, but hidden away at the same time, cinderblock or cast cement building—grey in any case—that an architect had

designed, or, a house with exposed beams, high tension aircraft cable, large main windows with narrow slits of windows for the stairwell and bathroom. I had even fantasized over a conceptually stimulated, high-minded ideal, such as a wall-like edifice barring an industrial zone from a new condo development, like an artifact stuck between the 19th and 21st centuries. I was both terrified and excited. That was where I would spend the weekend thinking, I thought. I realized then that he'd not given me his reason for leaving and because I was traveling for work, I assumed the same for him. But such assumptions are flat and always prove to be wrong. To expect so much from details, while knowing nothing considerable of the man!

With the address in hand, I checked the number on the building. It was summer, by now about six in the evening, muggy. Instead of a grey cube, a common redbrick building from a hundred years past, the courtyard lined with mountain bikes and beaters. Two wings of the redbrick building stood forward on either side of the entrance, symmetrical and with repeated fire escapes. A burgundy awning above the walk to the front door remained from the past—canvas rather than plastic—a past masked now by overgrown conifers which also stifled any original plan for symmetry in the yard. It was surely a retired hotel, the residents now missing their doorman and concierge. A hotel fallen into apartments, it seemed. Inside the first door I looked for the buzzer number of Gustav's neighbour. The mailbox labels were typed or handwritten and affixed with yellowed tape. One was labeled, in a print typical of architects, G. E. T.

Presently I was adjusting to this reality of the architect's home and, in turn, a new impression of my past acquaintance—apparently financially unsuccessful—when a woman came down the stairwell and let me in. She was young, probably eighteen, certainly an undergraduate student. We introduced ourselves. Her name was Lara and she told me she

was studying at the college of art and design. "This way," she said, and I followed her up a dull brown stairwell with broken tiles on the walls. The low watt light bulbs augmented the dinginess of our climb. I enjoyed each worn step. Lara asked if I were Gus' brother or cousin, and I said no. Then she asked me if I was also an architect, and of course I said no. She showed me Gus' door and said that should I need anything to call on her. I said, just for fun, "Tell me something about Gus that I might not know." She replied, "I don't know him well . . . Off the top of my head?" I said, "Of course." "He looks like you," she said. "But you've probably heard that before." Then she smiled and disappeared down the hallway. I had imagined that her apartment would be immediately beside the architect's, but it wasn't.

One of the facts I discovered a few days previous, while browsing on-line, was that Gus had written a sort of manifesto, or at least a list of maxims, or dos and don'ts he worked by, but I think it was a manifesto despite the stigma that goes with them nowadays. One on the list was, 'If you can't look different, look the same.' Another, 'If all else is failing, consider the alphabet.' As the alphabet is often on my mind, I found this suggestion more memorable than the others. Do we ever get away from alphabet and what follows from it? And so I opened his apartment door to the tune of ABC running in my head.

My expectations, already dismissed by the interior of the building, were completely abandoned upon entering his apartment. As I opened his door I tried to evoke, against the visible reality, those squares sliced between rooms, the matte white walls, and those Euro fixtures.

But the apartment was nothing like this. In short, it was packed up. Boxes everywhere, stacked and scattered. The drab light gave no movement to the room, no sense of time. The boxes might have been sitting there for years or maybe just for hours. I paused. I had been devising a plan, a plan I only now fully realized, to assign each thing in Gustav's place with a

reason, a function within the system which was this architect's life: to understand him through his things. I had wanted to assign a task to each part of his apartment, in hope of seeing, or deciphering some underlying structure. But there was nothing, only cardboard boxes. I didn't step further for several minutes. Everything was packed up. It was a dim old hotel room, scarcely conceived as an apartment. I entered and dropped my travel bag on the floor. I took a few steps, careful to avoid brushing up against any of the boxes lying about the floor.

Just then I was stirred by a crack, the sound made by stone on glass. I heard it again and went to the window.

Down two storeys, on the street, a woman searched for another pebble—precariously, as she still had a bicycle between her legs—at the edge of the sidewalk. I glanced down at her, then was distracted by the view across the street. A building was under construction. Evidently the previous one had burned down or been demolished. I then looked back down at the woman, who was looking up at me. I attempted to open the window, but it was jammed, laminated by paint. I looked for a knife but the kitchen was unequipped, then returned to the window and another smattering of cracks. This time she must have chucked a handful of pebbles or other street debris. I stared helplessly as if the situation was insoluble, then undid my belt buckle and used it to pry against the window frame. I kept at it despite the futility. Even while the woman continued to hurl pebbles at the window I enjoyed this ridiculous, insuperable task. I liked the whole scene. Leaving this window I looked for another, and found a small, glazed one in the bathroom. I opened it, and, craning my neck to put my head out, yelled, "Hey!" She yelled back 'hey.' She sounded more excited than upset. "Hey Gus!" she shouted. I shouted that he wasn't there. She asked what I meant. I said he was away. "You don't look away," she said. "You're mistaken," I replied. I

wondered if she needed glasses, though I *was* two storeys up. “Come on up,” I shouted, as part of the flow of conversation and then wondered, as I looked for the front door buzz-in, how I had come to resemble the architect, or he me. Of course resemblances happen—people, when first you meet them, will say you look like someone they know. It happens all the time. But how often do you see someone who you would mistake for yourself? Never. Anyone would have looked a tad more like Gustav when framed by his apartment. What an impression she would have when she entered, thinking I was this man, the designer of places, who I wasn’t.

“Gustav,” she said, stopping at the apartment door which I’d opened in advance. “Oh.” She saw me straight on and I gave her all my attention. “Oh. Hi. I’m a student of Gustav. I’m Xaviera.” Already she began to explain herself. I introduced myself and she took another step in. She didn’t have the youth of a typical student or carry herself like one; she was in her late thirties, possibly forty. She was older than me for that matter, though with no grey hair that I could see. “At the . . .” I began. “At the technical university,” she said. She said she occasionally dropped in on Gustav to say hi, then she asked me what I was doing in his place. “I only just arrived,” I said. “I’ll be staying for a few days, though it doesn’t look very habitable.” We looked around, rather theatrically, and as if to explain Gus by way of his apartment she said, “He doesn’t like things. The last thing he’s interested in is things, in having them anyway. There are collectors in the world, there are accumulators, junk jockeys, goods enthusiasts, hoarders, spoilers, drawer-fillers. Gustav is not one of them. Look around.” I looked around. There really was nothing but the boxes. “See,” she said. “No plants. There’s not even a chest of drawers to nose in. Oh, the kitchen cupboards, check them.” I got the point and felt strange about following her instructions. “Go on,” she said. So I did. The drawers were empty, as were the cupboards. “Not even things you’d expect in

an architect's apartment, like pictures of buildings. Or a computer for that matter." "And a bed?" I interjected. "I'll be staying two nights." "Well I imagine there's a bed." "Do you know where he went?" I asked. "Was it for work?" "I can't say," she said. Then she began asking questions about my personal life. Receiving Xaviera into this empty apartment was indeed unexpected; she filled the place with her presence, which, despite the few minutes I'd spent there, was welcome. I decided it was not a place I wanted to be alone in. It was the lack of order, or rather, the particular kind of order, a life packed up as if to avoid arrangements, as it to avoid detection, that made me uneasy. I did not want to answer questions about myself, though I wanted to keep talking, especially to ask her about Gus. I suggested we go out for a drink. She said 'alright' and suggested instead of going to a bar that we should buy some beer and bring it back to Gus' apartment. "I like hanging out here," she said.

Z- —as Xaviera and I stepped onto the street it was the first I noticed anything of the city's character. The city was, after all, part of the reason why I had come. So much has been said about cities recently, I thought, so much taught in classrooms and written in essays, so much stated then restated by others, imagined, fantasized, dreamed up. Well, this neighbourhood—if that was the correct word—this street, was unremarkable, like a million others across the continent. Wide enough for four cars, though divided in two, and with a narrow sidewalk and the odd pedestrian, lined by a limited assortment of New World housing styles. Nothing was happening as we walked along. So I asked, "Say, did Gustav ever have a head injury?" Xaviera looked at me doubtfully. "What kind of question is that? No, he didn't. I don't believe so anyway. He never mentioned it. Why do you ask?" "Before I left I heard some strange things about him. I just wanted to clarify, or rather, correct, what I heard." We walked along. Undoubtedly Z- had all the charms of any city. Metro systems

uniquely decorated, arts funding, festivals. Moreover, harmony and completeness. They called it a complete city, I remembered. A complete city, ha ha. I'm walking in the complete city, I thought, chuckling. It looked complete enough. "You're in architectural studies," I said to her. "Why do they call Z- a complete city?" "They do, they do," she said. "It's not just for tourism. And they don't call it the 'everything' city. No, they call it the complete city, don't they? The complete city. Well that's just one thing they call it. There is a lot of talk about it, isn't there? We're fairly sick of hearing about it around here, especially at the college. Especially from the media. But there's something to it. People from Europe come to study it. From Amsterdam and Rotterdam. Helsinki. At root, at base," she said, "it seems to be fully realized; the problems of city have been reduced here but still exist of course. So other city planners study its structure, all of its networks and systems. It is not perfect but it feels, to be here, unlike any other city I've been in. It has a whole feeling to it. But this is not to be taken too seriously. It's more theoretical than real and many people don't buy it and those who do buy it are the most suspect of people. Don't think too much about it, it's a fairly abstract notion." "Did Gustav move here because of its reputation?" I asked. "I don't know why he moved here, but it was probably for the position at the college," Xaviera paused. "I can't imagine him not being here. He's central. He's a hub of activity, a real hub. So many people want to access him. So many people know him and want to know him. Not only students and colleagues. People from other places." "Is he spread thin then?" I asked, but she didn't hear me as she opened the glass door to the convenience store. Xaviera chose some beer for us, a larger box than I'd expected—an eight pack—and paid for it despite my offers, even denying my money as I crammed it into her palm.

Upon our return, as we seated ourselves amongst the boxes, on either side of the box of beer, she pulled two bottles out and passed me one. Right away I pressed her for more

information about Gus' project, if that was why he was away. With the first sip of beer she opened up. "It's related to a project but not just that," she began. "There are family reasons too." "Oh," I said, "an illness?" "Well, in part. An inheritance he has to deal with." "I heard about it from a friend," I said, though I could not recall whether I had heard it or whether at this point was willing to accept anything new on Gustav. "I heard about it, but that's all I heard about it, nothing more. Some money?" I said. "Land, I think," she said. "I don't know, I shouldn't be telling you this. If you two were close I'm sure he'd have mentioned it."

Questioning her even in this more relaxed situation produced only a longer list of facts, though most of these were consistent with his position as a teacher at the technical college. I doubted, however, that a man so active teaching at the college could also have an active practice of his own. Maybe I was underestimating what one person could be. I knew I had to drop the topic, for Xaviera was no longer saying anything.

Neither Xaviera nor I knew what to expect of each other now, but something needed to fill the desolate apartment, this first silence since we'd been in company. Initially I'd thought Xaviera to be a youthful middle age, now she seemed more an aged youth, the confidence gained by experience wavered as she looked about the room. The ceiling light was a bare bulb of about 40 watts, making her, from my perspective, recede into the background and blend with the brown boxes and the yellowed wall. The beer seemed to slow her thoughts, although she'd had only a few sips. Perhaps my presence in place of Gus's caused her to be self-consciousness and silent. Likewise, I became unfocused, I saw her no longer as Gus's student but as a strange woman, who left me speechless. A personal question was necessary, not about her favourite building, but a question equally as silly. Or, alternatively, an act was necessary, to share in a transgression: to open a box.

Xaviera stood and walked around the apartment as if curious about the arrangement of boxes, as if she might even move some of them, or rearrange them. She was, I realized, thinking about her teacher in his absence. “Do I really look like Gustav?” I asked her. “No, not now. You did to begin with.” Then she asked, “Why are you here? What brings you to Z-?”

Knowing I was hopeless to mislead people, I did not answer her. She circled the room; I was seated. She approached me with the question, “What do you do?” I bent my neck to see her face, as she was only a few feet away. “What brings you to Z-?” she asked. “Well,” I said, “curiosity. I’d heard about its completeness. And work. Work brought me here.” “What work?” “Why should this be the ultimate question?” I replied. “Well then, how do you spend your days? What do you do after you wake up, before lunch, in the afternoon, as the sun is going down? Do you have a schedule? Come on, what makes you so important that you can’t tell me about yourself?” “It’s not about self-importance,” I said, and still I told her nothing more. I looked down from her face to her legs and to her runners. I almost opened a box just to distract her. She turned away, throwing her hands up as if to fill the room. “This place could certainly use a couch, especially at a time like this.” “Yes,” I said, “yes.” I felt dejected now that she stopped inquiring into my life. I feared I had to answer, the truth or not, otherwise she would leave, and I did not want her to leave. She continued to step around the apartment, around Gus’ boxes: an act that kept something alive in the room. So I joined her, but with greater determination than she. I began searching for something in the apartment, with Xaviera part cohort, part audience. I looked for a clue, for something Gus had planted or had left absentmindedly, an object, a letter.

Virtually everything Xaviera said from that time forward was a nudge at my silence. “What’s the point of piping down?” she asked. “What are you looking for? Is it that you

don't know?" I continued to nose around, I even pushed a box out of my way. Then there was a knock on the door. We both went to answer it, but I reached it first. It was Lara. "Hi," she said to me, then she saw Xaviera for the first time and said hi rather weakly. "Here," she said, handing me a postcard. "I'd forgotten to give this to you. It's from Gus." "Thanks," I said, and turned it face up. It was a picture of the Eiffel Tower, probably from the '60s judging from the tint. "Bye," Lara said and closed the door behind her. The silence that followed aroused the feeling of when two people are caught in a questionable act. "What does Gus have to say," Xaviera asked. There were a few words written in a clean architect's uppercase, in pencil. "It's just a note addressed to me." "Well, what does it say?" she asked more firmly than I would have expected. "It's just a greeting," I answered, looking again at the Eiffel Tower, and noticing how it was like an A. "It says, 'Please make yourself at home. Sorry about the boxes. My favourite kind of building you asked? At present, the new Great Library. But my favourites change almost daily.'" I was consoled by this little card and the pretty picture.

Evidently Xaviera was not. "What am I doing here?" she spoke aloud. "What are you doing here, what are you doing here? In Z-? What's in your bag? Anything?" She looked as though she would open my bag and dump the contents on the floor. I said, "Please don't." "Forget I was ever here. I'm gone." Xaviera turned and left without another word.

Reduced to solitude, I thought. I desired to leave immediately but knew it would look strange to Lara if I left her the key now. I put Xaviera out of my thoughts as best I could. I stayed, as planned, for a few days in Gustav's apartment. It was peaceful and his bed was comfortable.

Close to a year and a half later I had heard nothing of Gustav, though I tried phoning him once or twice and looked for his e-mail address. He was still listed on the technical university's website, but these things are not always updated. Sometime later, while I was flipping through a magazine of curiosities, I saw a one-page article on him. According to the reviewer he'd been working on a kind of alphabet project—a letter-shaped building in 26 towns, no cities—though he wasn't proceeding in alphabetical order. The article said he was working on his fifth building. Each building was “small, simple and elegant.” The manifesto, I thought. ‘If all else fails . . .’ Well, this closes the case on Gustav E. Trachtadec, I thought, and put away the magazine. I knew I had not closed any case at all.

Yet a more complete story came out a few days later. This one struck me as more likely, or at least more satisfactory than the first magazine article. The letter-shaped buildings were being built simultaneously, all 26 at once. Gustav was overseeing each letter-building, despite each being far from any other, across the globe. Web-cams, I thought. Or perhaps he had a team through which he operated. One man could not be in 26 places. Unfortunately the article explained no more than this.

Lastly, as though to close the subject of Gustav, I took the postcard of the Eiffel Tower and erased Gustav's message. I wrote on it, “Dear Gus, I've thought about it, and the alphabet does not provide structure in any substantial way. I'm no architect but I've tried the alphabet. It does not work. My manifesto would read, ‘Don't consider it.’” I had long forgotten his address, but this did not dissuade me. I left my house. At the last moment, before putting it in the mailbox, I wrote the address as The Complete City. One day, months later, when I returned home from an outing, I found there was a message on the answering machine: “Hi, I was just passing through town and I remembered you lived here. In fact, I

phoned up one of our old schoolmates who said you were working here as some kind of writer. Just passing through. I hope you're well."

So again he entered my daily thinking. I went to my desk and wrote down everything I knew about him, beginning with our time together at secondary school. As I recalled each little piece of his life, over the following week or two, I went to my desk and jotted it down. I organized his attributes and accomplishments in chronological order, as a kind of C.V. When I was satisfied that nothing more could be added, I spent some time looking at the list and considered how the items fused into a single person. Over the next week, as I drank coffee at the café I frequent, and as I went for my routine walks, I compared the diversity of facts with the singularity of the person who was Gustav. Then it struck me yesterday, as I was sweeping my floor and searching for the word I happened to need, that all of the things I knew of Gustav did fit together without any irregularity. It was simply that he had done so much over the past 10 or 15 years, and I had done so little. I realized then, what I should have written on the postcard was, A writer's fear is in the telling. I never did find the word I was looking for.

The Long-exposure Photograph

The photograph was taken at one of the large dinners we held at 303, a shared quarters in a warehouse. Galen was among the first to move into this space, several years ago, and the last to move out before it was gutted for condos. He is the only one I know with certainty to have been at the dinner, because he took the picture and he gave me this print, maybe a year and a half later.



At the heart of his picture we see the candles, and to their sides, the ghostly figures. The wispy, here-then-gone impression of motion is characteristic of people in long-exposure shots. The classic example is Daguerre's first image of a street scene in Paris, taken from several storeys up, in which only one figure is in clear view, a man having his shoes shined for the length of time the shutter—or whatever the early equivalent device was—remained open, the street appearing otherwise evacuated. Though I have seen many photographs with

blurred figures I cannot become accustomed to the feeling of uneasiness they give me, which has something to do with seeing time pass. In this case the complete obliteration of each persons' identity makes me look longer and harder at the picture, for any unique and enlightening detail.

What remains of the food from the dinner are uneaten pieces and smears from sauces or oils left on the plates. Under a magnifying glass, I might correctly identify the form on the most central plate as a potato, and that dark blotch on the near left plate as ketchup. Otherwise, all that is left are vague shapes and crumbs. Some drank beer—Stella Artois—and others seem to have had wine.

The bathroom light, shining through the window in the upper left, must have been on and off during the exposure, during the dinner, and so the room glows as if lit the entire time. It is only in the five candles, some of which are doubled by their reflection in the background window, that we see the full accumulation of passed time. The diminishing height of the flame attests to the candles' loss of body, and, by extension, to time's movement. But some of the candles were moved, I believe, as two seem to occupy the space only partially, translucently.

Besides Galen, it appears there were six others dining that night. I know that at the time of the photograph I was living there, as I can see from the brand of cereal on the shelf, the steel thermos an old girlfriend had given me, and the Panda licorice which another friend had bought me. It is likely, then, that I attended the dinner. Here is where the investigation weakens, and relies more than anything on hopeful memories. I have the feeling that I occupied the lone chair at the sink end of the table, but this is more intuition than memory speaking. The more I look at the picture and write about it, the more it seems that I was there.

In the centre of the photograph, directly above the radiator is a bizarre play of light resembling ink splattered on a page. I guess, in a kind of blind stab, that the person sitting in that position wore glasses and that the glasses focused the candle light into an intense spot and that the movement of this spot produced the aleatory scribble. Possibly the spectacle-wearer spent much time speaking to the person on his or her right, as the light trails favour that side. Or it may be that only from this position did the glasses focus the light towards the camera. If not glasses, the light trails may simply show a candle being moved, so that as someone reached for the pepper, for the mustard, or for the bottle of wine, he or she would not be singed by a flame.

The reflection in the window appears to be on the same image plain as the distant landscape. After some studying I realize that our bicycles, hanging from hooks opposite the photographic view can be seen amongst the farthest trees on the horizon. Their wheels are the give-away, so distinct in shape. The camera and the tripod, however, are lost in the dimly lit houses across the street.

I believe now that this picture was taken towards the end of my stay at 303, as Galen began documenting the building, late in the day, knowing that our place was purchased and our time there would be brief.

The Prosperity of Walter May

Now let me recall the instant when I left my apartment, alerted by sirens and red lights flashing off the building opposite my window. I closed the door behind me, descended the stairway and entered the street. Already there was a crowd looking up and taking in the blaze. Though I was tempted to stand among them, I didn't want to become party to onlookers and tenants. The plumes of smoke blended the stone buildings and the grey sky into one continuous field, and the fire itself, when it lapped up the new air from outside the windows, held me like every fire I had ever seen. But as I said, I left quickly and asked the sight to flee from my mind.

After rounding the corner, out of sight of the incident, I picked up my pace. My stride became a jog and my jog a hoof. "A fire," is all I could think. The air was stifling, filled with moisture and the smell of the buildings. My neck stiffened, the weight of ashes fell onto my shoulders, soot entered my insides. I couldn't keep going for long, just a few blocks, before slowing, coughing and seeing nothing still, but the red, orange and black obscuring the walls and destroying all of the furnishings within them. I hadn't put anything in my pockets, nothing in a bag, I had nothing at all but, as they say, the shirt on my back.

I look back at this moment as one looks at a beautiful youth, at a youngster boarding a train, suitcase in hand, leaving home for the first time.

The people on the street—the few who were strolling about—seemed oblivious to the smoke rising above the buildings still not far off. One man, however, who himself stood smoking outside a beauty salon, was gazing at the sky. His face showed not a worry in the world, or perhaps not a care; it was clean, unmarred by the bigger picture. As I passed by he caught my glance and nodded. I wondered if it was a simple hello or an agreement with my

situation. A nod of knowledge and sympathy? Could he stand so relaxed while knowing more? I left this commercial street for a little residential street.

I tried to contain myself by hugging my arms against my chest. My hands and ankles were sweaty. I thought of all of those tightly packed boxes, the fire working through them and the apartment, thoughtlessly brazing, charring, licking and combusting a path, a great send-off into smoke. My plan! I thought, my plan.

How little I knew of my apartment. Beyond the lease, how could I even call it mine? It could have been anyone's. It *had been* someone else's three days prior. Someone with abundant luck, I lamented. Yet the apartment had made a great impression on me from the moment I stood outside it waiting for the superintendent. Inside, there was a small handsome room, the smallest and handsomest, off to one side of the apartment near the door to the porch. It had a rounded window with a wooden frame that juttred out surprisingly. I considered its minute dimensions and its out-of-the-way existence. It might well have whispered something kind in my ear while I was perusing it. When the superintendent showed me the place, he had simply opened the door to this room without any explanation or suggestions, as if to demonstrate that the door worked instead of revealing this little gem of a room. I had been sitting there as I heard the first siren.

My eyes were closed when a man spoke my name. "Daniel?" is all I could say at first. He was a friend, an old friend, a big man with broad shoulders filling out a suit jacket, wearing a striped shirt, this season's collection. Yet, I was certain that the last time I saw him he was my exact height and weight. Now he appeared to be larger all around.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm living here now. I just returned from London. I was doing work for a newspaper food column. What are you doing here?" he asked.

“I just arrived. I’m visiting for the day,” I told him. “My girlfriend lives here.”

As we skimmed old pages—our schooling at the technical institute, mutual friends pulled into the entertainment industry, others who moved cities and held positions at magazines and universities—I offered little of what I’d been up to, and failed to mention the fire. Something of his manner and our history prevented me.

“And your work?” he asked.

“Faux finishing,” I said. “But I intend to get out of that line as soon as possible. The artificiality of it all . . .”

We circled back along the quiet one-way street, shouldered by a park, then wandered into the green space. I looked about the park, then Daniel looked over at me. He looked at me as if he had picked up his train of thought. “Do you smell smoke?” he asked.

I said, “No.”

“It’s funny, I think I smell it on you. A bit like a bonfire. Are living in the country?” he asked me.

“No. I really smell? Is it strong?”

“No, not too strong. But it’s certainly there. It’s not cigarette smoke,” he persisted.

“Funny.” He put his nose up against my T-shirt. “You most certainly smell of fire.”

“Oh. Well it’s not from the country, although I can see why you imagine that. Fire these days means the country, camping, backyard bonfires from trimmed trees and miscellaneous scraps. The only place for a fire in the city is the fireplace. And only in winter.”

“So in the middle of summer, like now, where does the fire fit in?” he asked as if feeding a fabrication.

“In summer, it’s true, who needs fire? Well, to destroy something. To erase something or get it out of the way. When you write a letter, for instance, and are fully ashamed of it. The letter to a lover proclaiming your undying love, perhaps your withering love, when you’ve spilled your heart and soul, what are you most likely to do with it? Give it to them, her? No. Take the lighter from your desk drawer, light it and put it, still burning, in the bath tub or sink.”

“The smell on you,” he said, “what is it from then, a love letter?”

“Well it’s not straightforward. You see, I had no place to put the burning letter. I just held on. I watched with indecision and the sense of impending doom. Then the blackened paper disintegrated all over my clothes. When I brushed my hand across my shirt the particles of ash must have rooted themselves deeper into the fabric, and continued down the front of my pants. I must have been sweating too, flushed from burning the letter. My fingertips still tingle. It only just happened, before we ran into each other. I didn’t realize how badly I smelled of it. You know how these things just happen, unexpectedly...”

“But who was it written to?”

“I came to town this weekend to visit my girlfriend. We had a fight on the phone a few days back, quite a bad one. Since then she hasn’t answered when I call. So I decided to come in person to patch things up, to surprise her. As I have a key to her apartment I thought that I would slip in while she was at work, and, well, surprise her. We would patch things up. But when I came to try my key I discovered that my key didn’t work, for whatever reason. So in the dim light of the hallway, I began my letter, it was an apologetic letter. Then I decided against it. I wrote a furious letter, and again decided against it. I had a book of matches in my pocket, and high on the drama of the moment, sparked the match, and...”

“And you burned them outside her door, and wiped the ashes down your front.”

“Which brings me to here.” I said.

He stared at me with what looked to be pity and concern. “You seem rather burdened by this girl. A whole lot of things seem to be revolving around your head,” he said, gesturing up.

I looked around and he laughed at me. We had known each other for so many years. Jokes can be so difficult to sense when you haven’t seen someone for a time. Humours dim, are weathered and dulled.

“Things,” I thought to myself. I know he was simply being a friend. He looked so healthy and bright, well dressed. *He* was carrying things—groceries it looked like, several bags to be more precise, the lettuce leaves and leeks sticking out. He’d just been to the farmer’s market, he informed me. An apple appeared in his hand and he offered it to me and again I failed to mention the real fire. It was too much! It didn’t fit in the conversation. He could tell there was something amiss. In all of this self-awareness I almost let a tear tumble down my cheek but held it back with a force of will.

“It truly is good to see you,” he told me. Before parting he invited me to a dinner party at his loft that evening.

When he left the park it was as if summer had shifted into fall. The summer sky was still cloud-covered. Green dominated the park, the leaves and grass equally lit in the diffused light.

Now I recalled my things—the things Daniel mentioned, for I knew of what he spoke. This accumulation, this pile of ideas which had been rolling after me like a dust devil, following me from town to town. He must have seen them surrounding me. False romances, fabricated tours, money schemes, distractions and all the faux finishing contracts—all failed attempts at a good life, at prosperity.

At about four in the afternoon I returned to my apartment which by then was burnt and unenterable. Yellow tape cordoned off the row of buildings, and a crew was still working; bystanders had lost interest. The smell was persistent. Smoke still drifted up from former rooms, through past windows, into the clouds. What was I to do? Stare at the charcoal sketch? I wasn't much of a gallery-goer, and yet I paused, as if this lone spot of familiarity would be a comfort to me.

Perhaps Daniel had seen was something else. Perhaps he'd seen a sign, for lack of a better term. A smoky omen. Perhaps he saw the fire spark my plan, a lightning bolt sent from up above to destroy my plan.

Because, as if triggered by a timer, the moment the sirens sounded I had been drafting my plan for the future—it was the first time since my move I'd been able to sit with a piece of paper at a table and consider a plan. All I had managed to write, along the top of the page, was *PROSPER INTELLIGENTLY*. The letters were as charged as a headline, yet personal as if I'd just coined the terms. What did intelligent prosperity look like? Two or three things I knew about it? There were no precedents I could think of, no role models who had prospered intelligently. I thought of my father, a farmer, and my mother, also a farmer; I thought of my brother who worked in fertilizer. Not one of them had really prospered. And my brother had not prospered and done so unintelligently. With the fresh legs one gets from a promising new city, I scripted these first words of my plan carefully as if learning to write, as if copying, as if conjuring words from a foreign language. I understood them now with alarm, seeing them disappear like trick ink, but irretrievable as ash. I pictured the pen melting into a black trickle and fumes.

It was dark. My stomach growled. I considered Daniel's offer of dinner, and convinced myself to go.

The Addition

On the steps of the Hall Building I thought I saw Daniel Libeskind, builder of reading machines and architect behind the famous addition to the Royal Ontario Museum. He had more than once mentioned to the media that he designed the latter on a paper napkin.

He seemed to be appearing everywhere—auditoriums, the radio, art magazines—drawing commonplace ideas together with the most elevated theory. Even now, the man who I saw on the steps was pulling things from the air as he spoke to the young woman accompanying him into the building.

Spotting the architect made me consider the handsome model I had seen of his enormous crystal addition to the ROM. It had glass triangulations touching the sky at unusual angles—contemporary feats of engineering some called it. The plan boasted the use of natural lighting from the downtown sun. A plain of even grass led from the edge of the museum over to the sidewalk, ideal for a picnic blanket and a discrete glass of wine. Suddenly nostalgia for Rosalind overcame me. I began writing a poem:

Was it the modern living

That ended our fun...

I was waiting for her—Rosalind—my former love. We were hoping to piece together a friendship from the remnants of our broken relationship. The break-up took place in my little woodshop where I was building an elegant bureau for her. I had invited her over to unveil my work. Two of my friends were leaning on the wall of the woodshop, drinking beer and chatting and I was clamping some siding onto the desk when she came by. She looked extremely uncomfortable. I introduced her to my friends. She muttered a hello. I was eager to show her the desk. “Rosie, come, take the chair, try it out!” She looked at the bureau with its hinges, drawers, a roll top, mirror and holes to put things in. Then she looked at me, her

whole body trembling and her face flushed, and said, "You slept with Anna." My friends slipped away in the brief silence that followed. Words of abhorrence streamed from her mouth and when they ran thin she told me something to the effect that my head was way up in the clouds. Then she left.

Rosalind considered the steps to the university a neutral place to meet since we were both students there. The steps lacked sunlight; and I was chilled while I sat there, despite the warm September breeze.

Rosalind found me while I was writing the poem on the back of a receipt. We hadn't seen each other for a month.

"You've changed your hair." I said. It was subtly dyed and side-parted. She wore baggier jeans too, and leather boots; she was always more tuned-in to fashion than I. We double-kissed, but quickly and I recognized the smell of her pillow in her hair. I could see her bedroom and her spacious apartment and even her roommates.

"Did you have to wait long?" she asked.

"No," I said. "A few minutes. I think I just saw a famous architect go inside."

"Oh yeah."

"The ROM designer." I explained a little more.

"What's he doing here?"

"I can't say. It might not have been him."

"I doubt it was him," she said.

"It looked like him. But you're probably right. It couldn't have been. What would he be doing in the Hall Building?"

We had other things to discuss.

“I still haven’t gotten around to the *Bataille Reader* so I thought I’d return it. I have a pile of other books I have to read through,” I said.

“I still have some of your stuff too. Your jacket...”

“Yeah, I’d like to get that back. I think you have some of my books still too. And my tent and camera. And some bed things.” I had already made a mental list.

A few days later I heard from a friend that Libeskind had been in the city on the day I waited for Rosalind.

More intriguing was that the busboy at Reggie’s, the campus bar, had found a napkin with a scribble on it of what appeared to be the Hall Building. He recognized the structure by its distinctively outlined windows. An addition was drawn emerging from the tower. The busboy, although he didn’t know the architect, must have sensed from the electricity surrounding Libeskind that he was of some importance—well enough to have slipped the diagram into his pocket. I managed, without trouble, to borrow the napkin for a couple of days. It was an unremarkable drawing, not very architectural in style. It did look like the Hall Building, with a badly curved bulb emerging from the top. At home I scanned the image onto my computer to use as a desktop background and pondered it in my spare time.

I imagined Libeskind and some others crowded around a table under the cool lights at Reggie’s. I imagined his words: “A challenge indeed! But let me tell you what I’ve been thinking. You see, I went across the street, into the building where your library is, and noticed in the courtyard area, the atrium, the sculpture playing on the Babel theme. You know the one? The writing in all kinds of languages on tiles and mirror, stacked in an artistically random configuration. It must have been installed when they built the place. How strange, I thought. Then there is the building itself, all red and green and pinkish, based on

the square, rather than the rectangle. Squares built on squares, grids and more grids. The architects must have planned it on graph paper! You think you're being measured in there! Oh Lord! Now, we have the broken words and whatnot forming a fragmented tower, the Babel Tower, dangling and leaning through this cubic building. So, with Babel we have something implied of God's fury and our own vanity. Alright. How does this relate to a Hall Building addition? I must relate it in some way. From the outside it looks like stacks of elongated egg cartons. What can we do with these? Where can God's wrath fit in here? Nowhere yet. Perhaps the old chicken/egg, which-came-first paradox could be played on. A little too obvious, though; a stodgy metaphor at that. These don't strike me as appropriate for an institute of higher learning such as yours. And yet the egg is a beautiful shape, elegant and strong. The fertilized egg of the packet. The emergent egg. How about this. Here is the building, those odd windows. Now here you have the egg emerging from the top of the building. The narrow end of the egg points up, slightly off centre to be more pleasing to the eye. But here is the true magic of the addition: it's made of a reflective material. It would act as a giant convex mirror, reflecting the sky and clouds back up to the heavens. You know what we have to counter the Babel Tower? Vanity reversed! God looking lovingly down only to see Himself."

Rosalind and I had broken up over—now I can say with the clarity of retrospection—over the complicated bodies of others. Other pussies and pricks had entered the picture, she would have said. At one point I wanted to implicate everyone—our friends, her roommates. No, this was not entirely true. I knew there were other reasons for our failure. There were other reasons every time I thought about it.

We met again, this time outside the Musée d'Art Contemporain. Another neutral locale, but a more spacious one. There were many steps to sit on—probably the most in the city. A veritable field of them.

I had just been to the dentist, and part of my jaw was still frozen.

People sat in groups all over the steps. Gallery-goers. Skateboarders and friends. Picture-takers. Dogs. Business people on break. A couple kissed by a light standard.

I sat far from everyone and dreamed of the great mirrored egg emerging from the Hall Building, blue sky in the background. What was it about that addition? Underneath it I imagined a picnic scene with myself and a lovely woman, an exchange student probably, from my Hegel class. People stood above us in the egg and peered down upon our scene; we caressed each other with warm fingers. Then Rosalind stepped into my imagined scene to tell me what was wrong with it. She said, "What's this new girl doing in our old scene?"

Rosalind found me with my eyes closed, sunning myself. She decided we would look at the exhibit inside the gallery. Showing was a retrospective of '70s public sculpture.

We soon stood before a rusty sheet of metal.

I told her about the Libeskind napkin, and my imaginings of his mental process. Then I asked her what she thought of it.

"I can't take you," she told me.

"What do you mean?"

"The way you think about the world."

I fell silent.

We attempted to discuss the sculptures intelligently.

"Rosalind, I miss some things about you," I said with cautious sincerity.

"Oh yeah, like what?"

I shouldn't have brought it up. I couldn't say what it was.

"Our romance," I said.

"Whoa! Romance? Romance?"

Suddenly I felt ill. Part of my face was still frozen. I felt the great amateur.

"This is utter shit. I don't have it in me today."

"Perhaps we should stick to the art work. Look at the rust there."

"Perhaps we should move on," she suggested.

My thoughts ran off. I couldn't help but think of how we spent days in bed together.

Then the argument which had run through my head before like an incantation came out of my mouth before the sculpture: "Maybe you were right to sleep with Johannes," I said. "The error in the system is what makes it so rich. I mean, by sleeping around you disrupted our perfectly comfortable relationship. There were two, just me and you, and then there were three. But then there were four: the symmetry of me sleeping with Anna made it balanced again! It was my fault all along then! There should have been three of us all along."

"Dear God..." she said.

We walked on.

"But there's more..."

Rosalind was no longer at my side.

I looked for her in the adjoining rooms of the gallery. Then I left. How brief our meetings were! How destructive was my logic, how undisciplined. I supposed I had made us reach a breaking point. But I was right. There was more.

Curiosity made me track down Libeskind's e-mail address. I sent him a message. I asked him whether he had in fact drawn an addition to the building. He responded the next day: "I

know of the building but it is only of novel interest to me, like a Kinder surprise.” Then I sent him the image of the napkin, and he responded: “Oh yes, it is funny you should send me this image, but I’m not interested at this time. Thank you.”

Rosalind surprised me by dropping by with my tent and camera and some other things she still had. I asked her about my books but she was uncertain which were mine.

“Since we broke up I’ve been writing poetry again,” I said.

“What kind?”

“Love poetry.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“It’s true.”

I told her that the architect scenario was a farce—I thought she’d like to hear it.

“What do you mean?”

“I e-mailed Libeskind and he denied any knowledge of the drawing.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What did you want from him?”

There was a long silence. I looked at Rosalind. My brain wouldn’t abandon the image of her sitting at the bureau with her dark hair. Then somehow she stepped into the image, a second Rosalind, again dispelling the dream, and the real Rosalind began leafing through a magazine that was lying on the floor.

The Eight Brightly Lit Windows

Standing approximately where I stood two months ago, I look at the photo, and see that the true subject, the one knowable only in retrospect, is missing. Central to the photo is Willie Pamplin, the mistake-maker, my friend who desires to work his way back to an origin. He stands, losing his hands in his dark jacket, leaning forward over the wall. He's reading the



span between himself and that building, trying to see a past self across the expanse. In fact he is throwing his mind across that great space, like a photographer his frame, or an archer her arrow, but whereas one can send such things across a space, it is time that he attempts to traverse. Time, then, is the true subject of this picture, though it is very poorly represented. Willie looks back upon those windows, brightly lit from the outside, still uncertain which of the upper four is the one he should drop his impure thoughts into, not that it matters, as any of them would do, and so he imagines the interior of one of them: the sunlit bedroom, dormant. I came to this spot in hope of seeing Willie, who I have not run in to since the day of the photo. It is a clear day, ideal for a walk up the Mountain.

The invitation

The owner of a bookstore invited Willie to the annual Christmas party. "Please come," the bookseller said. "I want you to meet my daughter." Willie had frequented the bookstore for two or three years, but this was the first party he'd been invited to.

The bookseller doubtless knew major facts of Willie's life through references and intimations dropped over the years during their brief, wooden chats. The bookseller knew, for instance, that Willie was a student of medical illustration. From the books Willie bought he knew of Willie's interest in design theory and architecture, and that he read only the odd work of fiction, preferring foreign writers to writers in English. In addition, the bookseller would have noted the books that Willie bought from the philosophy section, not entirely philosophical, that were filed there for lack of an esoteric or occult section. Perhaps it was because he always came to the bookstore alone, never with any friend, male or female, that he was now being asked to the Christmas party expressly to meet the bookseller's daughter. In his one-room apartment, where he so often remained throughout the day, Willie produced exquisitely rendered drawings of people on the street, and women he hired to pose, usually in classical positions, standing contraposto, reposing Olympia-like—his most expensive habit, funded thoroughly by a sizable scholarship from the university. The bookseller probably knew nothing of this pastime. It was the formality of the older man's request that led Willie to the party, almost as if by duty, at least by assignment, for the explicit but not exclusive reason of meeting his daughter. I cautioned Willie when he mentioned the Christmas party. "It's not the formality of it, no," Willie responded smartly, "but the way a random possibility becomes a real event, and how this man, the bookseller, made it so. Though we often chat we had never introduced ourselves until he invited me." I ran into Willie, as I did once or twice a month, sometimes two days in a row then not for

another month, but typically on a street corner in the vicinity of the bookstore and the university. I was a creature of habit, walking the same streets every day on my way to work. Now it was snowing heavily for the first time that year. Willie wore a light jacket, beige, and a cheese-cutter hat, inappropriate or optimistic for the season, and I wondered whether he had bothered to glance out his window before leaving; I pictured a window that looked onto a commercial street, above one of those stores that sells retro toys and expensive vinyl reissues—a store he'd find no excitement in. Willie lived north of the Plateau but I didn't know exactly where, as he'd never invited me over for drinks or dinner. Despite our meetings being sporadic and unplanned, I felt the need to look out for him as an older brother would, because he spoke freely to me, without, it seemed, much of a filter, and he let his actions be guided, unwisely at times, by unknown forces that some call fate, but that he called chance. "But it is only so," I said to him, "because you said okay to him, otherwise this possibility would be unrealized you would soon forget it." "It's funny what you remember," he said. But it wasn't about memory, I thought. The truth was that if he lived on the other side of the university he would not frequent that store and he would not have been invited to partake in this affair. "At any rate, nothing will come of it. Surely," Willie said. "And if something does, then good for me."

Underlying the calm of Willie's demeanor I sensed concealment, that he was pushing something far below the surface of conversation, and as far below conscious thought as possible. No one could be so calm living by accident.

The window

Two weeks later, after running into Willie on the street, I went with him to a nearby café. He told me about the Christmas party: "Allen mentioned, the morning of the party while I was

buying a book, that he generates narratives of his customers' lives. Well he didn't say so in such clear terms. He said, 'I couldn't help but imagine you coming into the store today.' 'Oh?' I said, which led him to mention that sometimes he thought about his customers when they were not present, that he imagined their lives. When I asked him what my story was, he said, 'Well, you shouldn't ask. I don't consciously invent a full, seamless story, more I guess at aspects of a life.' 'So in my case?' I asked. 'Well, with everyone I make some kind of judgment based on the books bought—all conjectures, I suppose, from there. I simply can't help it, though I know many of my imaginings to be wrong. I make the same mistaken assumptions as anyone else makes of strangers.' 'So in my case?' I asked. 'In your case,' he said, 'ha, ha, you've put me on the spot. I suppose I brought it on myself, I've put myself on the spot.' He looked past me when he spoke, as if he heard me better when I was in his periphery. 'Well,' he said, 'you're a student for one, medical illustration, correct? And you don't come into the store with any book in mind, or section either. You're a browser, you never ask for a book or ask for a recommendation. I also see you at church sales, so you're a collector too.' He stopped, so I asked him quietly, what else? 'Your choices are as if new to the world, that is to say you choose books as if you were out to discover the world, in a good way, if I may say so. The rest is what you've told me.' 'That's not really a narrative,' I said. 'How about my story?' 'You're asking too much now,' he said. 'Aren't you curious to know if you are right?' I asked. 'It doesn't matter, for the most, if I'm right or wrong. I don't really want to delve into the lives of my customers, though I am rather good at putting two and two together. I'll see you later tonight, I hope.' Then I understood that he was trapped behind his little counter and that to end the conversation I had to move.

"I was nervous entering Allen's home, surprisingly, as social events usually give me no worries. But the expectations of meeting the daughter grew in me: I had to perform, and

more than that, I had to maintain a prescribed role as the young man to meet the daughter. My anxiety heightened when, entering the house, I was greeted by Allen, and though he was welcoming and accommodating, he mentioned nothing of the daughter whom I was supposed to meet, and so as I entered I entered alone, not having brought a date and not knowing anyone aside from some regulars I recognized from his store. My eyes darted around for a possible daughter—any woman around the age of twenty or twenty-five. I felt ridiculous in this search, and then I felt the strain of gender sensitivity, for what was I doing pursuing the bookseller's daughter, upon the suggestion of her father? More to the point, what would I say after 'hello'?

“Two women emerged from a hallway, arm-in-arm, similar in posture, faces turned to each other in conversation, as in illustrations of the constellation Gemini, the stars joined and elaborately fleshed-in and robed, but otherwise the women looked quite dissimilar. Still, I sensed that they were sisters and without question were Allen's daughters. If I introduced myself to them I would still be lost as to which daughter he intended, because he failed to mention a name. And, I asked myself, why would she want to meet me, a stranger, and what was her father up to? But it was entirely in this strangeness that I felt so at home. The formality of the arrangement seemed to manifest in the room's ornamentations, in Allen's vest and combed hair, in the framed decorations on the wall, in the tasteful choir music playing in the background, in the floor lamps and arabesque rugs. Though the sisters both wore dresses, the dresses were rather modest and made from a heavy material like felted wool. Still, for a party to which oddball, loner clientele were invited, the sisters were perhaps overly done-up and therefore seemed out-of-place, and, in a way, showpieces. I don't think they noticed me, because as soon as they stepped into view, an older woman wearing a mint beret approached them. I decided to see what happened, to see if they would come and

introduce each other to me, so I went to the table of goodies and poured myself punch from the crystal bowl. I noticed Allen standing near the front door as if hypnotized, as one of his customers talked to him. I recognized the man speaking and was surprised he'd been invited, as without a doubt Allen had to listen to him for hours any given week, while trapped behind his desk, pricing stacks of books. This customer now behaved the same at the bookstore Christmas party. I stayed by the punch bowl, and glanced at the sisters, though such a glance across a living room was sure to draw attention to me. The sister on the left—Didi I learned later—looked away from the bereted woman right at me and fixed my eyes and I could do nothing but smile. She returned the smile and looked back to the bereted woman's hand gestures. I looked away then and noticed above the old wood paneling which lined the room, an illustration decorating the wall. When I saw that the subject was a man and a woman in some kind of struggle, I moved for a closer look. It was not at all straightforward: the man was clothed, kneeling, with eyes directed to a spot on the ground where the woman's bare foot was, and the woman's nude body arched above him, her thighs turned away in discretion and a baton clutched in her hand. I put my face right up to the picture to inspect the hand work. The figures looked collaged from two, maybe three sources, yet were seamlessly assembled. I read the title, *Startling Appearance of a Lady in Mid-Air*, then I turned and Didi was standing right there, with Lara shouldering her. The room could apparently be crossed in seconds. 'Hi,' I said. 'Hi,' she said. 'Here I present Lara, my sister, the teacher.' Then Lara stood forward and said, 'Didi, my sister, the youngest.' I shook hands, after a moment of hesitation, as it is hard to know what is customary—our generation has not decided, and because the sisters wore dresses, a sign of formality, I was almost inclined to kiss cheeks, *bisous*, but they offered their palms. When I told them my name they smiled warmly and didn't repeat it back to me, just smiled and remained silent. Self-

consciousness awoke as I noticed my proximity to the drawing, and the barrier the sisters presented; my self-consciousness told me I needed to explain having my face right up to the picture, the lens of my glasses almost knocking the glass of the picture frame as I tried to discern the signature. I could have told them that I was a student of illustration, that my specialization was the human body, but I didn't, for they might have taken it as a sleazy joke or a come-on, and more importantly, I wanted to withhold information about myself, to avoid leading the conversation in that direction. I preferred the sisters to guide the conversation. Didi said, '*Startling Appearance of a Lady in Mid-Air*, Allen's favourite,' so that I wondered if perhaps she wasn't his daughter. I had known, however, a number of people to call their parents by their given name. I had never.

"I told them I couldn't help but like the drawing.

"Didi replied, 'I love it too. It's like a Max Ernst collage. How strange to create an erotic scene from disparate illustrations, characters from altogether different locations and engaged in far flung activities, a kind of love that should never have been, cut and pasted as if it truly happened. But it's no Ernst, just a later copycat, a pasticheur. Still nice though.' I asked if she knew where the two halves were from. 'No, I don't know anything about it. I wish I did.' Though I admired the Ernst collages too, I remained quiet as I didn't want to give Didi all the attention, with Lara's eyes on me. Lara rolled her eyes at her sister and said, 'Oh, these drawings, let's get away from them.' It was the first time I detected a disharmony between the siblings and, more subtly, saw Lara act as if things should have been heading in another direction. 'Have you looked at the others?' Didi asked and took me by the elbow to another drawing, her sister disappearing then; a few minutes later Lara was with her father. Didi and I had more punch.

“Later in the evening I discovered more illustrations in the kitchen and the bathroom—a whole collection. In this moment when I was left alone, I looked at three more by the Ernst imitator. The collage form was indeed so perfect for improbable and thrilling liaisons: the man clothed in a lab coat, or a great coat from an outdoor scene, holding some kind of implement—a tool, a pipe, a fork or knife or a device for accurate measuring or for seeing closer than with the naked eye—clenching a knob in one hand and holding the body of the device in the other, a telescope, for instance, and with him, from the other illustration, the partly garbed or completely nude woman, reclining or swooning, sometimes a giant in proportion to the man, sometimes flying through the air, the lovers never making proper eye contact. Other figures, much smaller, occupied the background, and paid no attention to the subjects of the drawing, but engaged in some other, utterly indecipherable act. And because the artist put together two people who should never have been together, creating a serendipitous collision, some boundary was broken in the midst of bystanders.

“Later in the evening Didi became occupied with someone else and I had a chance to speak with Lara. Her felt dress was sleeveless, letting the wispy hair poke out from the crease of her armpit—the house was hot, getting hotter, heated by a woodstove. While talking to her I had to remove my sweater and put it over the arm of the couch. Her hair grew longer than most people let it go, down to the small of her back, which usually indicates some kind of religiosity—Christian for instance—or a devotion to an art such as violin playing—I imagined her handling her instrument as if it were a person. But neither was the case. She’d simply let it grow, she said, as a kind of default setting, though it was trim and tidy and cut around the bangs. Our discussion was pleasant.

“Following my conversations with both sisters, while looking for the washroom, I stepped into the wrong room. It was small and empty, with a single bed. Though the party

was in full swing not far off, the room was quiet. Going to the window, I saw the great view of three storey walk-ups and the Mountain not far off. Someone passed the open door while I stood at the window, and though the room was unlit, I know I was seen, and all of a sudden I felt as though I was a figure of great importance, let alone to trespass, like a curious child or a foreign traveler. And I felt as though I was accepted and incorporated into something greater. It was in this sense of favour that I looked out the window, coated with dirt and patterned by rain, and saw what I must call a rift in time, a break with my past. There was no returning to the time before meeting Didi and Lara. Their forwardness had somehow pushed me along. It was a very forward family. I heard the rumble of a great truck driving by—the sound of gods moving furniture, I imagined—I felt like a mortal being manipulated. There was a knock on the open door, and as I expected, Lara was standing there, backlit. ‘Willie,’ she said, “why are you in my room?” ‘Your room?’ I said. ‘Well I don’t live here, but I still consider it mine. Well, get out now, come back to the party.’ She would play host to me and guide me for the rest of the evening, and invite me to meet her later in the week.”

The dream home

Willie designed a home soon after he met Lara. It was to be located in the city on the quietest, most remote street—one you would never find unless you were wandering aimlessly, one which turned left and then left again, and which tapered street by street like an arm from shoulder to elbow to wrist and fingertips, only to end at the nail, where his plot of land would be. It was hybrid of the house he grew up in—a ‘70s fashioned bungalow—and a low and flat country house that appeared in a certain Danish film he liked. Yet in his imagination, then on paper, it gained a second storey and shrunk at either end. My attention,

when looking at the drawing for the first time, was led to a pair of statues, male and female, stylized in the manner of art nouveau, holding up the second storey balcony with their heroic strength, and whom you would have to pass between in order to enter the front doors. These nude statues were rendered in careful detail. Inside would be a medium sized room for a drawing studio, Willie told me, a master bedroom and other bedrooms for guests, or perhaps for children. The objects that would inhabit this home streamed out of Willie's mouth. As he described the place, the diagram rolled out in front of us on the café table, he didn't mention Lara at all.

I was putting on my parka when Willie held up a finger, telling me to hold on. I sat down and Willie began speaking with excited hesitation. "Lara," he said. In the five years I'd known him only twice had he mentioned women in his life, and I had met neither one. I had never seen Willie so incapable of saying what he needed to say. I realized then that the conversation over his drawing had been less calm than any we had had before. "Lara," he said. I had no idea what strange or terrible thing she had done to make my friend so ill at ease. "Lara is so very forward. She's beautiful, you know," he said as he suggestively put his finger on the female figure in his drawing. "Oh," I said. "Great, Willie, great."

What I understood by the end of our talk was that they'd slept together. He certainly made a big deal out of it without saying anything explicit. At home that evening, as I thought about Willie's agitation earlier that day, it came to me that he had never had sex before, and that this time with Lara was the first. Most people I knew had become calmer after this primary event, but Willie became unsettled. When I woke up the next morning I was still thinking of him and I wondered, though it was implausible, whether the bookseller had somehow seen in Willie a certain virginity, and that is why he had wanted him to meet his daughter.

The prohibition

The dialogue that took place less than two months later was affected and strange: after such a brief go they had to show each other where they stood—not how they felt about each other, but whether they would continue their relationship at a distance. Lara was going to Mexico. She suggested they meet on the Mountain, at a spot that overlooked the Plateau. Willie agreed, though he immediately began to feel uncomfortable and unnatural, for such a location added an extra, monumental weight to their liaison. As a silent sign to Lara to keep their discussion light, he dressed in bright blue-green pants and a fluorescent orange safety toque that he had found at a thrift store. He knew they would be discussing her plan to leave for a year, so as they stood on the precipice, unnecessarily cold, Willie looking across the snow-topped buildings—the grey-brown of brick as seen from afar—and Lara looking at his profile, he said the phrase as if it had just come to him: “Yes, we will remain together.” And she repeated it as if rehearsed: “Yes, together.” “And loyal,” Willie said, as if he were trying the word out for the first time, so he said it smiling, as the novelty emerged from his mouth.

Not long after she left, as he walked down the spring streets where skin—ankles and elbows—was beginning to emerge again from the cover of winter fabrics, he began to consider the word for its flexibility. ‘Loyalty’ was all too clear, but because it was left to their discretions, he wavered and wanted to make it flex where it could be interpreted.

Willie enjoyed the long-distance correspondence. He sent her letters decorated with drawings of people in public places. In the second half of the year of her departure, Lara began mentioning a man, but only in her e-mails, in what seemed to be a naïve enthusiasm, though e-mail messages often have indecipherable tones; sincerity, for instance, doesn’t transmit, nor does irony. She never mentioned the man during phone conversations. Eventually Willie asked about him. “He’s great, you’d love him,” she said. She undoubtedly

detected the concern in Willie's voice and so stopped mentioning him, and Willie, for his part, let it go. He sensed she did not like her job, but when her contract came up towards Christmas of that year she renewed it for another term.

The eyeball

As Willie drew the inside of an eyeball from a few photographs on his desk, he began doodling, and then he put down his pen, put on his shoes and left his apartment. Since he was nineteen he'd been interested in a belief system, the essence of which was "The world will decide." He believed that to be governed by chance was purer than to be governed by will. In keeping with this he enjoyed living as if there could be no revision; the first time stood. To him, this was the heart of chance. Yet he wasn't in the least interested by Tarot, dice or coin tossing, rock-paper-scissors, the lottery, pointing blindly at maps or dictionary pages, spin-the-bottle or pin-the-tail, horse races, the stock market or many of the related fears such as meteor collisions, quakes, bombings in metros. But he did enjoy diversities such as Boggle, automatic writing, exquisite corpse chains and other surrealist games—activities which led him to know the Ernst collages in the book entitled *La femme 100 têtes*, translated as *The Hundred Headless Woman*. Now, thinking of this interesting man Lara had met, as he paced along his street, far from his apartment, he searched for words of wisdom, and lamented he could remember no edifying lines, not from his grandmother or grandfather, not from his parents, or teachers, not from any book of aphorisms he'd left in the bathroom or kept in his book bag. Not from Allen either, and as he recollected their simple interactions, and visualized Allen behind his counter, no words would leave Allen's lips other than the 'hello's and, of course, 'I'd like you to meet my daughter.' Even though living in the present would seem to imply always paying attention, he felt that he'd been

elsewhere some much of the time. He remembered, now, instead of words of wisdom, the figure of wisdom, Lady Philosophy, described by imprisoned Boethius in his *Consolation*. Holding her books and sceptre, she wore a torn and faded robe which constantly shifted to fit her height, tall then towering. She sat at the foot of the bed, and chased away Boethius's distracting muses, and wiped away his tears with the frayed edge of her robe. Then she made him confront his misfortune, step by step, question by question.

Willie made his way back to his apartment and wrote a letter to Lara asking her directly about this interesting man, letting his thoughts flow, the ink running over two small pages until he ran out of steam. Then he lit the gas stove and watched the letter disintegrate in a few seconds. When Willie told me about this episode the next morning, over espressos and with the sound of rain hitting against the café window, he had more to say: "I think I've been missing the signals all along. The subtle hints planted in everyday interactions, the between-the-lines of nervous gestures—hair twirling and finger chewing—the touch on the knee for emphasis, all the run-ins that seem accidental, and the ambiguity of e-mails. I've missed them all. I have never acted on someone else's subtleties. I have barely acted." He paused. "I should start now, shouldn't I?"

The daydream

With Lara in Mexico, Willie allowed himself such impurities of thought as happen even when lovers are tight. He imagined himself with a woman from his art history class, then with one of the models he'd hired; on his drawings scattered over his desk, by his coat rack, and most significantly, in that room Lara kept at her father's. Again it startled him, for it was not Lara or the young woman from his art history class who was in the room, but that person who lived in the house, that person he didn't want to name. Why did such impure

imaginings need to be possible, even realistic to be so satisfying? And why were the sisters so wonderfully unlike each other, as if they were not family? Then Allen appeared in the background of the scene, like one of the minor figures from the collages, pricing books, his line of sight bypassing Willie. The daydream would no longer slide into another image and it would not dissipate.

Willie continued to see Allen at the bookstore, and their conversations changed very little from the time before he'd met Lara. Allen would offer a friendly question, "So what's Lara have to say? She tells me so little." And Willie began to suspect Allen of keeping track of their relationship through this anodyne pleasantries—though Willie could scarcely answer Allen's simple inquiry.

A week before Christmas, Lara came to visit. It was the first time Willie had seen her in ten months. She stayed in her room at Allen's house, and as her time was entirely free, and Willie was on holiday from school, they spent every moment together, renewing their interest in each other. Lara never mentioned the man, and Willie didn't ask. That episode seemed to have disappeared into the past. During these weeks I saw nothing of Willie.

A week after Lara left, at our usual table at the café, Willie told me about the Christmas party: "While Lara was occupied with the woman who wore the same mint beret as the previous year, I approached Didi. It was the first I'd seen her in a year. She'd grown her hair longer. 'I just got a job,' she said, 'at a hotel, downtown. Follow me, I want to show you something.' Didi led me down the hallway, past Lara's room, to the washroom. She knocked on the door, opened it and waited for me to enter. The smell of cinnamon saturated the air and I saw there were two stubby red candles sitting on the toilet tank, lighting the room. 'This is funny,' I said, as the room was tight for the two of us. She shut the door. 'Just wait,' she said, now concerning herself with a wooden box affixed to the wall.

She took an electrical wire that lead out of the box and reached past me, brushing me as she put the plug into the tiled wall by the sink. The candle smell made me feel high, like from using a magic marker. ‘Okay,’ she said, taking my shoulder and guiding me to the box. ‘Now look into it.’ There was a hole in the centre, like the entrance of a birdhouse. I asked Didi to hold my glasses while I put my eye to the hole. Inside was a model room, dim, the only light coming through a window at the side of the box, like moonlight. There was a drawing of a man at a desk, with a feather in his hand. He was affixed to cardboard midway to the back of the room. Around him were furnishings drawn from different perspectives, in a variety of sizes. ‘Are you ready?’ Didi asked. ‘Yes, I think so,’ I said. ‘Keep your eye where it is,’ she said. Then, from above, a woman appeared with a large sheet in her hands, and she dropped down and enveloped the man. ‘Ah!’ I exclaimed. Then the woman flew back up out of view, and repeated the motion. I felt Didi’s hand on my back as she manipulated the box for me.

“‘What do you think?’ she asked me. I glanced over my shoulder, then had a second look inside the box. ‘Where did this one come from?’ I asked. ‘Me,’ she said. ‘I made it. What do you think?’ I was stunned. I turned to her, worried now that someone would walk in. ‘It’s great,’ I said, ‘it’s great.’ ‘Isn’t it?’ she said. Could a sign be so unsubtle, I wondered. Didi handed me my glasses, looking pleased with herself. ‘You really like it?’ she asked, and opened the door.”

The postcard

Three weeks after Lara had left for Mexico and her renewed contract, towards the end of January, Didi dropped by. She removed her overcoat—an old fur-trimmed coat, patterned like a heavy curtain—revealing what Willie realized was a hotel worker’s uniform—a starched white shirt and a black skirt, and a burgundy kerchief concealing her neck. A dated

outfit that would be quaint, ugly or stirring, depending on who wore it. He looked at Didi with disbelief when she entered in the uniform, a disbelief gathered more from her outfit than from the unexpected first visit and from her knowledge of his address.

“How did you find my apartment?” Willie asked. From Lara, he wondered, though resisted introducing her name.

Didi explained how she had followed Willie one night, back to his apartment: “You were walking east along Sherbrooke at a rapid pace, lost in thought. I crossed from the south side to the north side and followed you as you turned up a side street, Stanley or Drummond, which climbed to the foot of the iron and wood staircase. At the top, as you waited by the medical building to cross des Pins, where the traffic is constant and too fast, especially during rush hour when we were there, you almost caught me as you looked around. I managed to cross the same gap in traffic as you, and enter the trail heading up through the mountain park and towards the main path, Olmstead. As it was early evening, there was an orange cast over the city, I felt I would be unrecognizable and so I stayed close and you trod along the forest track, never looking back. What was I thinking, all this time alone with you and without you knowing? Besides returning again and again where the strap of your bag pulled your jacket tightly against your back and revealed how underdressed you were, wondering if that was why you were moving so swiftly, then wondering if you were capable of taking care of yourself—you wore nothing on your head, your ears a burning red. We emerged from the trees onto Mont Royal and were blasted by wind from the open street. You continued up the sidewalks, plugging past window displays, north through the Plateau and finally to a staircase, where you climbed to the second floor, found your key, and entered. Then you turned a light on and I knew you lived here.”

He wondered if this was a confession and why she should be confessing it to him. And why now on her way home from work, still in her uniform?

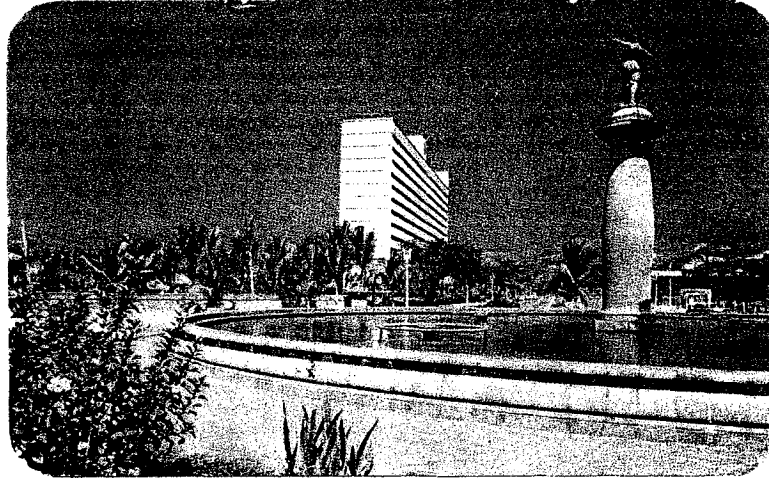
“May I sit down?” she asked, settling into the single armchair, leaving Willie his wooden chair. She looked around the small bachelor apartment, to the shoes and boots by the door, to the bookshelf, and to the great table covered abundantly with large sheets of paper and a notebook computer. Didi loosened her kerchief and put it on the table. She leaned back and he noticed her black polyester skirt which ended at her dark nylons, one calf resting on the other shin.

Didi lifted a postcard from the table. “It arrived this morning,” Willie said. That morning he had received a postcard from Lara. For months before Lara visited, he had been living a dreary existence, tired of his schooling and of his uninterrupted walks, his French poor and unpracticed, his studies in anatomy and illustration becoming dull and frustrating, devolving from enjoyment to work and from work to burden. And the denial of an expected grant made him particularly glum. For many years Willie had been unaffected by low periods, unfazed by dreary weather and inspired by solitude, as he had an uncommon ability to dwell in the present, to inhabit the immediate environs. But with Lara far away, her future return represented an important marker, and so he was pulled helplessly towards that point. When the postcard arrived it was like a beam of light coming through the window, which stilled the room. On the back Lara had written that she was presently sitting at the counter of a café, staring across the wood and brass to the street, as relaxed as a leaf, and missing him immensely.

“That fountain needs some people,” Didi said. “You must miss her,” she said. “She’s not staying at that apartment, the one in the picture, is she? It’s so remote-looking.”

“No, she’s not.”

“Don’t you wish you were there with her?” She handed Willie the postcard as though he hadn’t seen it.



“Yes, of course I wish I was there.”

“It’s true that I followed you home that night of my own volition,” she said, “and for reasons I can’t exactly explain. But I must try to explain. The reason I came tonight is because Allen sent me here. He said he hasn’t seen you in a few weeks. He thinks maybe you are taking time off school. He wants to have you over for dinner.”

“Oh. Will you be there?” Willie asked.

“I intend to be.”

“And you followed me because?” he asked.

“Because, of course, because I wanted to follow you. Because I ran into you and had to do something, but did not know what thing that was. The easiest thing to do was follow you. I wanted to learn more, like where you were going, and where you lived.”

“Anything else?”

“Then I wanted to follow you up here,” she said. “To see where you lived. But it was too much at the time.”

“And now?” Willie asked and passed the postcard back to Didi.

“Now. . .”

Willie felt he was being tested.

“Now I wish Allen had been more prudent.”

The error

I ran into Willie on my way to work, and I had no time to chat, so he asked me to meet him later that day. He suggested an overlook on the Mountain where the trees were cleared, allowing a view of the city to the east. When I arrived I saw a man leaning against the wall, who I assumed to be Willie, though the plain dark jacket and slouched posture made it uncertain. I had my camera with me, and took a picture from a distance. I couldn't say for what reason. Did I want to remember him like this, for instance? Did I want to be able to



show him what he looked like leaning there? Was it simply because I had my camera with me that I took the photo or was it that I wanted to finish off my roll of film? I felt the camera sitting in my hands after I'd snapped off the shutter. I knew Willie would not care that I had done so, but it seemed like a pointless thing to do. I was there to talk to him, not frame him and not make something out of nothing.

Now, as I approached, he looked happy to see me.

“This is the first time we’ve met by arrangement,” I said.

“I suppose I never felt we needed to before. Or I needed to. There is a first time for everything.” In earnest, he said, “Tomorrow I am to have dinner with Allen and Didi.”

He told me how Didi had come to his apartment a few nights back. “I finally asked her why Allen had wanted me to meet Lara. She told me that Allen had strange ideas. That maybe he wasn’t playing a big enough role in the lives of his daughters. She told me that he liked me a lot. And so with the excitement of his annual party, he wanted to do something for one of his daughters. ‘He has an active imagination,’ she said. ‘He really has his days.’”

“Is there a special reason for dinner?” I asked.

“I got a sense from Didi that Allen wanted to ask about Lara. But I’m not certain.”

“Is there something that bothers you in that?”

“I became worried that Lara would be back from Mexico, there at the dinner, as a surprise.”

“Are you still worried about it?”

“Yes.”

“Why does it worry you?”

“All the while, as she sat before me, I kept imagining Didi in different poses, different positions. I thought back to the Christmas parties, to meeting the sisters, to going to that particular bookstore, on that particular day, and each day before, to telling Allen things of my life, to finding an apartment on that side of the city. I looked for an error that I had made. But I could see no error. I had barely done anything, so how could I have erred? What had I said to Allen that made it all happen? “So what is my story?””

Willie looked over the neighbourhoods to the building where he had met Didi and Lara.

“What do you mean by error?” I asked.

“Now I am entirely in their hands. Now there is no chance involved. The possibilities have been exhausted.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didi stayed that night. I helped her with her hotel employee’s uniform and then she stayed.” Willie paused. “Yes. And so the dinner worries me. I picture, around the table, Allen, in his vest, across from me, Lara, back from Mexico, to my one side, Didi to my other side, forks and knives in our hands, pleasant music in the background. It is clear to me what terrible things could happen there at that table. I must decline this invitation.”

The next morning I went to Allen’s bookstore. Though I had been there before, the man behind the counter was unfamiliar to me. He had dark wavy hair mixed with silver. He had a large head, a shaven face and a reddish-brown complexion. Putting a face to the name, I needed to understand why he had such power over Willie. I had not prepared for a conversation, so I edged around the room, searching the shelves without really seeing the books, trying out phrases in my head for an intelligent or leading first word to Allen. The store had been busy when I entered, but the students had since left. I must have appeared lost, as Allen asked me, from his chair behind the counter, if he could help me find something. I looked at him face-on for the first time. He looked marginally to my left.

“No. Thank you,” I said and returned to browsing. I took the stepladder and moved it so that I could look through some of the out-of-reach M’s in the literature section. After a few minutes, I stepped down and moved the ladder. I continued moving the ladder around,

climbing it and browsing and pulling the occasional book off the shelf, for twenty to thirty minutes, with nothing to say to Allen. Finally I went to the counter.

“Can you recommend something?” I asked him. For who was he, but a bookseller?

And who was I, but his customer?

The Asrah Levitation

It was the 'mind expanding' that solicited his response. Though he was sympathetic to the plights of others he usually paid no heed to the 'can you spare a dollar' of daily life. He lifted himself from the public bench. Leaves fell around him from the large oak. While eating lunch a song shuffled through his head like an ambivalent ghost—he must have heard *Third Stone From the Sun* in the underground food court, musically updated from the version he owned. He once owned. The lovely vinyl disk must have vanished in the midst of a move or, who knows, had been deliberately let go at a street sale. Who could account for disappearances? It had already been a long, mind-blinding workday though only three and a half hours were accounted for. In one sense he was a notch above canvassing—doing dog-work a contract would never state—yet, in another sense, he was an upper-wrung worker: writing promotions, copywriting, drawing up concepts for mail-outs. An uneasy, unclear position, unforeseen in his earlier days. Still he believed he was morally a whisper above this disreputable world, the world which nearly engulfed him. He believed his fingers even now had an anchor on some dry, dreamy land, the nature of which he would be hard-pressed to describe. His fear: any day he would be enveloped completely, past repair, his heart would molder and his hands would lose all feeling. He was a far cry from the image of vitality displayed on his student I.D. card, a few years expired, that he kept in his wallet as a totem of his personal history. Mind expanding indeed: of the drugs he had experimented with in his younger years none had really expanded his mind; augmented his idle lifestyle, yes. Taken him around the block, made him lost in familiar places, sent him in circles chasing shapes through low-lying neighbourhoods. It was absurd to hear 'mind expanding' come his way; his black Italian shoes and tie slung safely over his shoulder should have dissuaded any itinerant dealers.

“Thanks, man, but no,” he said to the young man leaning over the bench.

“Are you sure?” said the youth.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t say ‘mind expanding drugs,’ mister, simply ‘mind expanding’. Do you want some mind expanding?”

The man on lunch break sat back down on the bench. “No. Thank you.”

“You just sat back down as if to say, okay my friend.”

“I felt like sitting.”

“Mind expanding...” he softly said, dropping a rubber ball from his hand.

The man felt the rubber ball as if it had fallen inside him. “Well what exactly do you mean by ‘mind expanding?’”

“I mean,” said the youth, “so what if it’s a drug?”

The man looked at his watch.

“Hey friend,” said the youth, “Check this out: if someone asked you, ‘Do you want to fly?’ you might say, ‘Yes, by all means, I’d love to, who wouldn’t?’ and then that someone says, ‘Well then, you’ll need to buy an airplane, or at least a ticket,’ then would you say, ‘No way man, I thought you’d train my arms?’ Hmmn? I’m not offering you religion or Alan Watts, sartori, et cetera et cetera friend, I’m offering pure levitation, no strange language, no work or repetitive exercises or energy channeling, no communal festivities, just pure levitation. Mind expansion. Mind expandingment. What’s your name compatriot?”

“Ezra,” he said.

“Ezra—good one. So it looks like you don’t have much time left on your break.”

Ezra tapped his fingers against each other. Work, he thought. It slips away, he thought. He made the transaction and took the pill.

“You maybe should have waited ‘til I was on my way friend, to swallow your purchase.”

Suddenly Ezra was taking the afternoon off. Sunny day! He left downtown and walked uphill. Up the mountain to that man-made lake at the top where dozed a restaurant and bright yellow paddleboats. A long iron staircase climbed under quiet trees. Leaves like pentagons and triangles. Confident strides, happy legs. A nice thick branch in his hands worked well for the walk. It was greenish wood, but reddish on the outside like a young birch. It probably *was* a young birch. Youth! Had someone wrenched it from the tree? A drunken college boy? Handsome stick though, fascinating from hand to ground, firm like the earth it touched, the firmness transferred through the stick to his bony shoulder, his slouchy spine. Corrective, a helping hand, an insole, orthopedic brace. He was really amongst the trees now. A bird flew up and others followed close behind. Little, yellow and peeping, migrating probably for it was the season; so long strangers, bye-bye friendly apparitions. He walked along the trail like a man with three legs. Who put this ground so low? Who wore away the grass? Who filled my boots with lead? Hollow...he tramped on the ground...hollow. Not hollow, a stone implied. Well indeed, if the surface cracked below his feet it would be a long goodbye. Who’s hiking now, threelegs? A bird landed on Ezra’s shoulder, the world no longer traveled past him—for after all he had stopped—and other birds came and perched, seeing him though he stood still and imperceptible. ‘Ezra—good one’ echoed through the empty chamber upstairs, the guest bedroom that doubled as a study, the one where he taught his wife’s best friend, his friend too, how to do her taxes—good one! When was the last time someone spoke that simple duet of encouragement! Certainly not the man who shared his 14th storey office, old squeaky shoes! Now there was a man of substance! Not one to drift off on a Tuesday. A friend indeed. This was one noon no

one would believe. No one would hear of it. Come now little birdies fly away. The paddleboats beckoned: Ezra, Ezra!

More stairs. Quite a climb, old boys, he said to his legs. His walking stick lodged itself in the grating of the iron staircase. It was proudly lodged and Ezra's grip on it was stubborn. So long then, wooden extension! These yellow creatures flying around, he knew them to be warblers. Every year they spent a couple days flitting around the mountain, pipping away. What a life! He tramped on the stairs—as a magician confirms for the audience the integrity of his device—which were neither hollow nor solid: they were solid but he could see right through them. The leaves and moist dirt and green plants were several feet below his feet. Up again he went. Sheer motion now, without the walking stick. Sheer motion up.

“Est-ce que vous avez quelque chose Monsieur?”

“Madame, je suis Ezra. Je vais au Lac aux Castors.” Four or five adults passed him on their way to the top. The iron stairs vibrated, resonated with warmth and hospitality. At times he felt his legs altogether disappear. Then the polar limbs burned two trails down from his groin and hips. He pushed a finger into his leg then into his stomach. He would have to shed much weight to levitate. Or perhaps he wouldn't. But he must shed something. Something of myself must be shed, he thought. Substance was surely the key: moreover the transfer of his substance from the ground to the air. Again he poked at himself, watching his shirt drawn into his side, following the finger.

Ezra breached the brow of the mountain and saw the lake. Lawns and restaurant were exposed, the paddleboats gleamed yellow in the water. The top, he thought. I'm at the top. A family crossed his path and the children stared like a pair of fresh demons. Ezra froze at their gaze, a new public sculpture, like a bronzed man who had been there before.

He found himself in the middle of the lake peddling the paddleboat until he hit the bank. The wind carried him like a cloud back to the watery centre. He leaned over the fiberglass keel. His tie dipped in as he noticed the familiar face below. Mr. Sun, ahoy! Who's your new friend? The reflections bore remarkable resemblances to himself and the sun. Ezra, tell me, what is this mountain that floats in space? A mountain indeed! An island too. A mountain and a lake that floats like an island in the city. Osmosis drew water up his tie and around his neck. Oh world! he said as the reflection of his face began shrinking in the water, what should be shed? The air around him seemed to fall down. Then Ezra felt a jolt and in one motion he was fully underwater. In another he was back in the boat. His eyes opened on a woman. Who was this heavenly leisure-maker, this lost flower beaming his wet way, gazing like a nurse down upon his face?

“Are you okay sir? Are you okay?” the woman said to him. He was bent uncomfortably over the plastic bucket seats.

“Yes.” She was all there was.

“I'm so sorry! My kids weren't paying attention to what they were doing. They rammed their craft right into yours.”

“We're sorry,” came in unison from a few feet away.

Needs entered the picture. Namely water, a voluptuous trickle. Thirst was a need. How the body turned against itself. The glistening wet suit draped over each curve of his body, his arms and chest, his thighs and knees, exaggeratedly like Vacu-Form plastic. The sun radiated behind the woman's head. She wore a bikini top though it was fall. Her breasts hung down towards his face. He raised his head to see another paddleboat and inside a thirtysome man with a red face, in a teal golf shirt—the kind with an insignia. An alligator

was it? An umbrella? A fox? A bear? A man sporting on horseback? What were these symbols from bestiaries that rang of office golf tourneys. Ough awful little things!

“You alright there buddy?” the man said.

The sun blinded him. The woman was gone. She climbed into the man’s paddleboat.

“Sorry mister.” And they were all gone.

The flower had fallen away. He shaded the sun from his eyes with his arm. Again he hit a bank, still prostrated over the bucket seats. He had taken off his jacket and shirt, his tie and vest, his watch. His hand was under his pants touching his soggy limp member, twirling it round his finger like a lock of hair. It was charmed by the hand but overly relaxed, or preoccupied or dreaming of higher, though less expansive pursuits. Was it altogether dead, lifeless, without a pulse?

Ezra stepped from the boat into reeds and algae, far from the dock. He left his shoes, tie and shirt laid out in the boat, arranged like a disappearance. He crashed through the reeds to the dry lawn and scuttled into the surrounding forest.

“Oh Lord!” he said, seeing the giant skeleton of a cross peeking through the tops of the trees. “There it is!” The paths took him down, in circles. Needs! He slipped on pine needles. His elbows lost skin. His hand was still down the front of his pants holding himself as a child holds a dead sparrow.

Then there was highway, cars now and then veering around the blind bend. A passenger with a hideous glance. Motorists with horns. Hot asphalt on his feet, then gravel and broken twigs. Ezra went through a great culvert, and in the darkness there was some relief. At the far end the light blared in, the silhouette of a tomb appeared and emerging from the tunnel he saw a vast drop and a vista of gravestones in rows and circles.

The youth spoke to him in his mind's ear. He said, "Pure levitation. Mind expansion. You've lost it friend! You've lost the levitation!" But, Ezra thought, they're not the same. Levitation and mind expansion were two bathers in the same pool, not one in an open field. Which was he to attain? He'd run up the mountain as if it were a takeoff, but to no avail. Ezra loped down into the rows of buried dead.

Outside the main cemetery office he found a fountain, much like a tombstone, water trickling from its nozzle. He closed his eyes and drank. Water rushed in. All he heard was the gulp of his throat muscles emptying buckets down the well over and over again. He heard a car idling behind him.

"Hey pal, this isn't Denmark. Where's your respect?" a voice said.

Denmark... rotten...

"Hey pal! People come here to see their relatives. Find yourself a shirt or get off the premises," a man said, his elbow leaning out the car window.

Ezra had drunk too much water. It sloshed around his stomach and rippled circles at the top of his throat. It ran off the end of his tongue when he looked at the man and said, "What?"

"You'd better get rollin' pal," the man in the car said.

There was too much water inside him. He stumbled. His eyes looked at the man's chin, at the tires of the car, at a sunspot on the windshield then up at the sky. Where was the sun? He spat out a tiny stream and closed his lips tight. There was no place for the water to go. Then he raised his palms like a carefree bronze cherub, turned smooth and green by the elements, and a gush of water shot out from deep within.

The motorist watched until Ezra was drained. "You asshole!" he said, then pulled away.

Ezra saw the water run into a crack in the asphalt, and kneeling down wondered if he had lost more than just the water. The pool receded and evaporated gently. The stony tar turned from black to grey. Ezra patted himself, his hand a fish fallen on dry land, and his wallet was there in his pocket. Still, needs preoccupied him: he wrestled with his legs and pulled his hair skyward; every thought that entered his head was a soggy paper airplane, an arrow already lodged weakly in a mound short of its mark, a leaking balloon. To rise above the city—wasn't this his goal? For his head to expand like a zeppelin and to lift his body up, his torso the carrier, his feet and hands to flutter like flags with aeronautical meanings. Then to see Montréal towers and cars, the convergence of parallel roads, the new downtown buildings of glass, the optimistic cranes hauling loads, workers on lunch-breaks eating grocery-store sandwiches, families at the museum. He picked himself off the ground, found a trail and reentered the forest. When the trail diverged he took the higher of the two—this always seemed a good move. Up he went to another height of this strange mountain. At last, a summit of sorts with a view of the Plateau. Ezra, he said to himself, his hands again looking for something to do, but this time caught motionless by the air. Was to levitate to become trapped by air? His thoughts dispelled with the feeling he was being watched. What was the reason for all this? Ezra asked. Why did he ascend the mountain without thinking? The levitation, he thought, the dealer had said it. Without knowing, he'd been commanded, he'd followed without a thought, he'd been told to levitate. He felt again for his wallet. The wretched wallet. And he descended the mountain.