

FOR ADAM

a novel by

Lowry Pei

For Adam

by Lowry Pei

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“Something allies truth with death. We cannot bear to tell the truth,
except in the final hour, at the last minute, since to do so earlier costs
too much. But when does the last minute come?”

Hélène Cixous
Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing

*

This book is for all readers who write the book they hold in their hands,
as they read.

L.P.
January 2000

F o r A d a m

This morning I found an extraordinary thing. It was a letter from Adam to a woman named Jessica – a love letter, pure and simple – and though it has no date I am sure it was written not long ago. It had to be written by someone over the age of twenty; and twenty-five, the age he amazingly is now, would be a lot more believable. I picture him sitting in this cabin not so long ago, this place where we used to come, his mother and I, eons ago, before. Where he came when he was a little boy, and she was still alive, and I had no idea that the happiness of those years was still the exception and not, as I imagined, the new rule of my life.

I picture Adam sitting here at the one table writing the letter, stopping between sentences to dream of his Jessica – I hope she was his, at least for a time. He certainly was sufficiently in love to deserve her. Or perhaps they were here together, as a consequence of the letter, living the kind of magical time Carol and I shared here once. Perhaps she brought the letter with her as a talisman, a visible evidence of being loved – but then why would she leave it here? It's not the sort of thing one forgets to pack. And that's not the only thing I don't understand here. This cabin is full of unanswerable questions.

Finding the letter has given me a reckless idea – to write to Adam everything I never told him, everything he needs to know, and leave it here, for him to discover when he and his Jessica return. A dangerous impulse, to say the unsaid, to blurt it all now as I have never dared do, for fear of losing the people I cared about most. It's his being in love that makes me want to; I know where he stands now, about to start playing his life for keeps. And don't I owe it to him – this gift that parents are afraid to give? Doesn't he need all the truth he can get?

I should write what I can, and leave it in something tightly sealed, so mice won't chew it for nests when no one is here, so rain won't drip on it even if the roof should leak, and put it where he can't miss seeing it. And then at the end I'll ask him to call me, and I'll wait. Nervously, no doubt.

Except I can't very well tell him to call me if I don't know where I'm going after I leave.

I could stay here; it's still my cabin, even if I haven't been here in years. I'm glad Adam has decided to use it; that seems to justify my paying the taxes on it all this time, when I never expected to set foot in the place again. Just because I couldn't let anyone else own it. It wouldn't sell for much anyway, though I'd get more for it than I paid Arne Lerstein thirty years ago. It was cheap then, and it would still be cheap now. There are plenty of cabins on plenty of lakes in Wisconsin; it isn't like this is the only one, and it's remote, the lake is small and the mosquitoes are extra large.

I didn't expect I'd be able to drive in here; the road was never much more than two tracks worn by the wheels of cars in the spruce-needed floor of the woods, even when we came here regularly. It took me a while to find the road at all; branches scratched their nails on the sides of the car, and bushes scraped the bottom of it, but someone – it must have been Adam – had cut away enough brush and saplings so that I was able to drive all the way in to the cabin. Just like in the old days, I was worried that if I got there and then it started to rain I'd be stuck in here until the ground dried out. I used to get Phil Hokkanen to come with his bush hog and clear the road and put a load of gravel on it, but to tell the truth I don't even know if Phil is alive anymore.

Staying here isn't a real possibility anyway. I'd never make it through the winter. If I were going to try, I should have already started patching the cracks, figuring ways to insulate, cutting firewood; and if I were a farmer like Arne, I'd have a vegetable garden and a root cellar.

But it's too late for all that, and there are other things I must do before I leave.

♦ ♦ ♦

A W r i t e r ' s J o u r n a l

Cambridge, October 16, 1995

For a while now a specific thought has been trying to come through. I'm in the odd state of being aware of that, even of hoping this thought might want to become a story, without being able to say exactly what it is. But it is something about death and memory, the anticipation of one and the question of the other. Or memory of the dead.

Simultaneously, I feel the old desire which never leaves me, to create an image of the dreamed-of, not just more life but a life altogether new.

Today I was reading a student's piece and this line jumped out at me: "End the end so the beginning can begin." Margret Grant got it right, for me. The time we're living through is dominated by ending the end. Consumed in a rear-guard action against evils and mistakes that don't know their time is past, that still have the power to do great harm before they die. And yet the inner life persists, underground, waiting for this era to be over, waiting for the beginning to begin.

A world on tenterhooks. When is the angel going to come? After the disaster, apparently, after the train wreck, after the stock market crash. After the baby is thrown out with the bathwater. After the worst, most reckless decisions have been made. After it's too late. After the end.

Meanwhile, lacking the awaited news to give, one must nonetheless write to people who are waiting for the angel to come.

Today a student of mine (not Margret) walked into my office and said she won't have her paper done because she has to go to another wake and funeral tonight and tomorrow. She just went to a funeral last week. I know she's not making it up.

I want to write to people who go to funerals and reflect upon death. They want to take pleasure in things that matter; they don't care for frivolity. They need to speak of the seriousness of their, and our, situation on earth; and they have a scorn for the superficial; and they want to imagine and live a good life.

♦

October 23, '95

A man awakens one day to the consciousness of carrying within himself an unknown secret. He is aware of being on a search and stumbling upon clues. He seems to have led another life besides this life, or to be leading one now. For the first time (but is it the first?) a memory of that other life breaks through, or a glimpse of something that can be explained in no other way. He is an "ordinary man" leading an "ordinary life" until this bursts upon him, at which time he recalls that he is not ordinary at all. This is a form of treason, revolution, overthrow — thrilling and inadmissible.

♦

November 5, '95

Every story has the same unwritten beginning: Life was as it had ever been until the day when. But on this day, different from all other days, something threw this life off balance, something tipped it forward, and to keep from falling it had to run to catch up with itself...

♦ ♦ ♦

I spent the night worrying that I might be handing Adam an unnecessary burden, and one that he could never be rid of, if I tell him everything. But about five a.m., when the sky began to lighten, I decided that was only an excuse, like all the other rationalizations I've used throughout my life to justify lying by omission. Then I finally went to sleep, and when I woke up I hadn't changed my mind.

So let me begin, before I do. Adam, this is for you. Now that you're older, now that you're ready to hear it all, these are the things I perhaps should have told you from the start, though I think you'll see why I did not. I'll try to keep it short, if I can, and stick to the important parts, and although some of this might sound like advice, it won't be. You'll see that I am the last person who should give it, and most advice is futile anyhow. Your life is yours; I want to tell you, at last, what mine has actually been. Surely I owe you a confirmation of what I imagine you must always have unknowingly known.

Some of what I have to tell you may not seem to make sense, and it isn't a tale for children with an easy moral. But it is the life I have actually lived – the secret life, the truth. Anomalous beads on the string of the ordinary.

That means I have to start, and it isn't easy.

I have to start right away before I have time to imagine what you'll think of me.

Once I had a brother.

You never knew him, of course. He wasn't the average brother, who would have played ball and learned to drive and gone on dates and later on would have gotten his master's degree in whatever. He was what they called, when I was young, an imbecile. Or a moron. One of those. I don't say this to be deliberately brutal; there used to be – it's hard to believe now – an official ranking of those terms, in medical parlance. I can't remember if a moron was smarter than an imbecile, or the other way around. But my brother, anyway, wasn't like other people. He was retarded, feeble-minded. He never learned to read or write – never could have, even if he'd been taught the way you might teach such a person today. And no one did try to teach him for long, though someone, some time, managed to get him to learn how to print his name: Aaron. That was the one word he knew on paper. It wasn't too easy to read, when he printed it, but you could.

Aaron was older than me by six years – which tells you, I guess, how long it took my parents to get their courage up to try again after they had him. I'm surprised now that they ever had another child, when I imagine how hard it must have been for them to have Aaron.

I wish I knew how much you remember, Adam, of what I told you about my father. I don't want to bore you. But it's been a long time since you asked me what your grandfather was like. I remember you

used to ask me how come we got this name, Kaiulani, when we weren't Hawaiians. Even my father wasn't, really – his parents came to Idaho when he was a little kid. His mother was Chinese, and there was Portuguese and Polynesian and English in there somewhere too. By the time I was born he lived in Springfield, Illinois, which you must remember, from visits to your grandmother much later on. The home of Abe Lincoln. My father looked different from other people's fathers, but people didn't say much about that. There was only one of him in Springfield – not enough to constitute a threat to anybody, but I'm sure he knew he was an outsider. I looked a little different from the average kid, myself, in grade school, and they teased me because they thought my face was too flat; but they teased Richie Flynn too, because he was fat and shy. It's impossible to get through your childhood without being teased about something.

My mother wasn't always the white-haired old woman you knew, who used to offer you treats and then scold you for taking too many. I know you didn't like her; I didn't like her much either, by the time you were born. But she was different when I was a child. She was a redhead – pretty, I think. One never knows if one's own mother is pretty or not. I always wonder how you remember yours. I can tell you she was beautiful, and she was, but I don't know what image of her you carry inside. I remember that as a kid I saw some old pictures of my mother, taken around the time she and my father got married, where I hardly recognized the young woman on his arm, whose calves were round like doves. None of those pictures exist anymore. She got skinny after Aaron was born, and that is how I remember her.

When you were born, Adam – one of the unforgettable days of my life – the only thing she wanted to know was if you were normal or not. I told her you were better than normal, and she made a scornful or impatient sort of noise – we were on the phone, but I could see her lips tighten – and said, "I want to know if he's like Aaron. You can tell immediately." That name had not been mentioned in years.

"He's not like Aaron," I said, with some difficulty.

"That's all that matters," she replied. "I'm sure you have to get back to Carol. I'll say goodbye."

It isn't all that matters to me, I wanted to say, but her tone didn't allow me to say anything but "goodbye" in return. If I had gone on talking any longer, I would have been remiss in my duty to my wife. That was the message. Whenever I talked with my mother, some opportunity to fall short of my duties was usually ready to hand.

So she must have known from the first moment that Aaron wasn't right. I don't know how she dealt with that knowledge, the first week, or month, or year – a great deal must have happened that I don't know about. I remember being surprised to hear that Aaron lived with my grandmother for a couple of years, before I was born and a while after; in my memory he was always there. Hanging over me, you might say, the way a thundercloud hangs, or a cliff, or something that might fall.

In childhood Aaron was more like an old man. It wasn't just his mind that came out different; his bones seemed too big for his skin, his teeth too big for his mouth, his nose too much nose for a child to have. He looked chronically uncomfortable in his own body, he stumbled into the furniture and dropped half the things he tried to pick up; he grimaced a lot, muttered to himself, pouted darkly and then burst out swearing at someone or something: "You goddamn goddamn!" My mother would reprimand him, every time. When he was more under control he'd mutter "You old D.O.D.," which I guess was his version of "S.O.B." His speech wasn't easy to understand, even for us; it was slurred and nasal, the inflection didn't necessarily go with the words, and sometimes if you made out what he said, it still didn't make any sense. He would be telling you something about his endless day that was always the same, and you'd be following it – uh-huh, Aaron, uh-huh, yeah, go on – and then suddenly he'd be talking about something that never happened and never could. How the mayor called him up and said get the police and the fire truck and go downtown and...then you stopped listening. He had no conception of time; it was no use asking him when anything happened, and if you said Christmas was coming in a week it was no more interesting to him than if you said it would come in a year. I always thought he resented us all for being normal, for having it so much easier than he did, for being able to read, to play with something without breaking it, to get through the day without a hundred frustrations and failures, without being reprimanded, without making other people look away. No one ever liked eating with Aaron; no one could ever enjoy a meal who had to look up and see him chew. The smell of him, which I have never been able to bear in later life except when you were a baby, was the smell of half-dried saliva.

I have a feeling that he resented me the most, because, after all, I started off as an infant: probably the only time in his life he was more capable than someone else. And then I had the nerve to grow up, right under his nose, and be better than he was at everything. To say that I

was the favored child doesn't even come close; I was the compensation, the consolation, the replacement for him, and by the time I can remember him clearly, when I was five, he must have known exactly how it was and always would be – because in a way that I can't explain, he was retarded, but he wasn't dumb.

Nothing I say explains Aaron – possibly nothing even gives you the right idea. He wasn't a regular person trapped in a peculiar situation, like someone with cerebral palsy. If you knew Aaron, you realized you couldn't imagine being him, no matter how hard you tried.

Of course, I didn't want to try; I fell a long way short of compassion where Aaron was concerned. What I mostly wanted was for him to go away. At least I had the excuse of being a child and a younger brother. My parents had nothing to shelter them from the judgments they must have passed on themselves when they couldn't bear him, but nobody could have lived with Aaron without wishing once in a while that he would just disappear. I know it ate at them; I knew it even then, and now that I've been a parent myself I can make a better guess at the hell that it must have been to live with love and hate in one heart. Maybe "hate" is too strong a word. I hated him at times; I don't know what they did, but I can remember how hard it was for my father to look at him sometimes, and the way my mother clamped down on her impatience. She had to clamp down her whole self, some days. There's no knowing what they might have been without him. They might even have been happily married – but they weren't. That is the fact. And I would like to deal in facts, few as those are, whenever I can.

♦ ♦ ♦

Prince Edward Island, July 2, '96

Sitting here in my shed with itchy neck, from mosquito bites in great plentitude, not looking at the screen but at trees outside the shed window that is open above my computer's monitor. It is a warm, even hot day, sunny and clear, possibly the first day that has been sunny, warm and clear all day — and not much breeze for P.E.I. — warm in the shed, the double doors are open.

I say these sentences a lot:

"Let me lean on the empty and the formless."

"Let me fall back on the Void for support."

And these:

"I do not know the words to write today. But the Nagual can write them. Let it write through me."

Everything that is to be created waits to come into being.

I say these things to remind myself of how it actually works, and of my role, which is not to presume to tell the Nagual, incomprehensible emptiness that is the true source of creation, what to create. Not to try to guide what I can never understand. Not to tinker, analyze, try to improve the words as they come, but just to listen to the little voice and to write down the words I hear. I have been telling myself all this for years now, and I still tell it to myself nearly every day that I spend writing, because every day I forget. On good days I remember to give myself reminders of what I am supposed to do; on not such good days I don't. But that's evaluating again, one of the

things I'm not supposed to do. It sounds easy to let the Nagual take over and create through me, and in fact it usually is remarkably hard.

There are too many louder voices inside, most of them domineering, judgmental, contradicting each other. Those voices can only lead to stagnation or paralysis. And any effort to guide gets those voices involved and this is doubly futile. Because ego wants to be right. But art is not about being right.

So why not write the impossible, go ahead and, if the Nagual wants to, let it try to write through me any old damn thing it wants, no matter how improbable or even impossible the project may seem. What is there to lose? Nothing. If no one is demanding a book from me — and no one is — if no one is waiting for me to write a certain book, or even any book at all, why not write whatever comes? Why not write whatever I want to write? Why not write whatever It wants to write? In this there should be perfect freedom: if no one offers anything in return, just go for it. Write for the enjoyment of being a vehicle. Write without an outcome in view.

♦ ♦ ♦

As I write this, Adam, I'm sitting on the screen porch, and whenever I stop the lake is always there, waiting for me to give it my attention. I was going to say it never changes, but it does, of course. I can watch puffs of wind travel across its surface, watch the sky change in it. Somehow, no matter how bright the sky that is reflected in them, its waters remain dark beneath the brightness, both dark and bright at once, no color I can name. Painters must spend years learning how to paint something like that.

I know there's a point of land across from us, but the darkness of its trees melts into the trees on the shore behind it, and sitting here you'd never know that behind that point is another arm of the lake, ending in a marsh choked with water lilies and reeds. The rocks that I know are halfway out to the point cannot be seen, unless perhaps certain ripples I notice are caused by their presence just beneath the surface. I remember you standing on those rocks, ankle-deep with nothing visibly holding you up, waving your arms to me on shore and yelling, "It's a miracle!"

"Be careful!" I yelled back. I knew how slippery they were, I was afraid you'd slide off and hit your head.

When I came here, I was thinking the lake might have gotten built up, but if anything it's less populated than it was years ago. Maybe it's too small and ordinary to qualify as a vacation spot nowadays. Only once since I have been here have I seen another person, a fisherman in an old metal boat, chugging steadily along in a northerly direction. But I never saw him come back. The herons and loons have all the fishing to themselves.

F o r A d a m

Bug sounds come in waves, night and day; cicadas send out their loud rasping in all directions, and when the sun is hot at midday I can smell the tall weeds baking in it, along with the dark, greenish scent of the lake's margin. Since I first came here years ago those things have never changed, which makes me feel, sometimes, as though life were still able to begin.

♦ ♦ ♦

July 18, '96

The completion of my efforts at art can only come from strangers. What I need, what I really mean when I say "the reader," is reader-strangers. Not my wife, friends, students, colleagues, confidants. Impersonal readers who read not because they know me, but for reasons of their own that I will never know.

There is something almost self-contradictory about art for an unknowable reader. It is, after all, an act of communication that I am trying to commit.

Or is it?

When I think of Helene Cixous's notion of the book that is written with the writer aboard, but not at the controls — which is the book I want to write — or the book which, as Deborah Digges said, is written out of "the unsocial, the anti-social, the sub-social" — which immediately inspires me or comforts me in some way because I identify with it — what does that have to do with "the reader"? Isn't the creation of such a work, and implicitly its excellence, founded on ignoring any such pragmatic goal as reaching an audience? When the Nagual writes, is it trying to communicate? Or only to create? "To create is, after all, easier than to communicate — fantastic truth" (Eudora Welty).

Suppose the work is never read by the reader-stranger: is it nothing? Is it only half-created because the stranger never transforms it by her creative reading? Unfulfilled? Or is it "read" by the universe regardless?

I realize today that American writing must never ask such questions out loud, must display seamless self-confidence, no matter how ungrounded that confidence may be. The writing (not the writer) must somehow constantly whisper in your ear, "This is the good stuff, this is what you've been waiting for, reading this is the best possible use of your precious time."

♦ ♦ ♦

Perhaps we could have endured living with him despite everything, if Aaron hadn't started to grow. At the age of fourteen, when I was eight, he began to become the size his bones had always predicted he would. And worse, he entered puberty. He didn't just grow taller and wider, he sprouted hair. Black hairs grew from the backs of his hands and along his shins and forearms. Hair under his arms. Hair on his face. Pubic hair. His penis grew obscenely and so did his interest in it. If he had been offensive before – say, at mealtimes – that was nothing to how revolting he became. I'm sorry to burden you with this disgusting stuff, but it's important. Only with the greatest difficulty could my parents teach Aaron not to take out his penis whenever and wherever he pleased and begin playing with it. It seemed to become hard the instant his finger touched it. Or before. He tried to feel up a girl walking home from school and only the fact that she was the daughter of someone who knew my parents kept Aaron from being locked up. After that, the word got around and girls crossed the street when they passed our house. Sometimes just seeing a girl out the window would give him an erection and if a chair or sofa was handy he would press himself against it and groan. I swore to myself that I would never get the way he was; I tried to stay out of his way at all times, because his moods were unpredictable and when they got dark enough he would try to hit me. I was quicker than he was, which probably saved me from getting really hurt, because he didn't know enough to hold back his strength.

He still felt he had to obey our parents, but when he was a teenager they had to yell at him until he flinched. Sometimes I thought

I saw him start to raise his hand to strike, but he stopped himself; he must have known that without them he'd have nothing. He was subject to terrible surges of anger for close to a year; he destroyed most of his favorite possessions – his record player, his toy piano, the Brownie box camera that my father had given him when it broke. As a child he would carry it around with him, and sometimes he'd point it at us and say "Smile." At fourteen he took it down in the basement and smashed it with a hammer. His bed was a tangled heap that smelled of semen and him. I was almost as afraid of him as people outside the family were. Hardly anyone would set foot in our house, no babysitter would watch Aaron, my parents never went out because they couldn't leave him and taking him anywhere ruined the trip. I could go to school, and my father could go to work, but my mother had to stay home with Aaron, and no one dared ask how her days were. You could see in her eyes that the two of them were locked in a struggle, and it wasn't a civilized one.

Aaron had the advantage because he cared a lot less about civilized behavior than the rest of us; yet my mother prevailed. Aaron's rage retreated into sullen stubbornness and muttering; he stopped masturbating in front of us; he could even, after a couple of years, be allowed out of the house alone, told not to leave the yard. That was when we got the fence put in – not that he couldn't climb over it, or open the gate, but it seemed to make him understand.

He spent a great deal of time in the yard after that. I think he was as glad to get away from my mother as she was to get him out of the house. Luckily the back yard was deep, and he could go away and swear to himself back there without our having to hear. At times, there was even an eerie semblance of normal life; my father taught him how to mow the lawn, and when the mood struck he would push the mower back and forth for hours, continuing long after the grass was mown, then forget about it for weeks. My father built a tree house, which he said was for me, but he made it strong enough for Aaron to clamber up into, and it turned out to be Aaron's hideout from the world. When it became clear that he would sit out there even in the rain, my father made a shingled roof. My parents told each other they were glad it made Aaron happy; that was instead of the things we didn't want to say.

When Aaron was eighteen, and I was twelve, he was a foot taller than me. He was the biggest person in the family, bigger than my father, with black scowling eyebrows and imperfectly shaved whiskers and heavy shoes that scuffed against the floor and kicked the

doorjambs. He seemed too big for the narrow upstairs hallway in our old house; his shoulder rubbed against the wallpaper and wore a shiny streak along the wall between his room and the bathroom door. His room was closest to the bathroom; then my parents, then me. There was a set of French doors connecting my room and theirs; there were curtains over the glass, but I never felt that either they or I had real privacy. I could hear them talking to each other in the night sometimes, but if they kept their voices down I couldn't make out the words. They probably didn't like it any better than I did. Aaron had the biggest bedroom all to himself; I had shared it with him once, but that had been years before. It was the best we all could do, because no one wanted to sleep in a room next to Aaron.

I think maybe the bane of Aaron's life was that he never had enough to do. He got another record player and this time he didn't break it; he listened to 45's until they were so scratched you could hardly make out the words; he kept the radio on all day, even when he was playing records. We had a TV, but he never watched anything for more than a few minutes. He talked to himself a lot in a nasal growl, living some fantasy life where he was a radio announcer or a train conductor or working in a store, telling people where to find things. Usually nails and screws. Things he knew the names of. From time to time he would go out in the yard and dig pointless holes and get yelled at by my mother, and then if his feelings were hurt enough, he'd run away. Sooner or later he was bound to run away because he was always being told not to do something and the frustration would get to be too much for him. He never went far. Everyone in the neighborhood knew him and left him alone; most people were unwilling to get too close to him, because he was big and had a perpetual scowl on his face. He'd go to the local elementary school and watch the kids play if they were at recess, but he'd stay outside the fence; he knew there were things that would get him in worse trouble than just running off. The teachers would tell him he should go home. But he wouldn't; he'd go to a place down the street called the Dari-Ette, where older kids hung out and drank ice-cream sodas, and where there was a pinball machine. Aaron couldn't get enough of that machine. He'd stick a nickel in it (they were only a nickel then, if you can believe it) and shoot a ball up, and then he'd put his hands on the flipper buttons and start flipping as fast as he could, in a frantic, palsied, St. Vitus dance sort of way. He never stopped flipping as long as the ball was still in play. It didn't matter if the ball was anywhere near the flippers or not, he just kept hitting them as fast as he could, snuffling with

concentration, making the flippers go ratta-ratta-ratta-ratta, on and on till it would drive you crazy. As often as not it worked, the flippers caught the ball and sent it back up, lights flashed, bells rang, the score mounted by thousands. Then finally that ball would sneak through. "Damn," he'd say mournfully; then he'd shoot the next ball up and the flippers would start again. Sometimes he'd hit them so hard the machine would tilt and stop working, and he'd mutter "You old D.O.D.," and the owner would say from behind the counter, "You're gonna have to quit playing that thing if you don't stop banging on it like that." No one ever paid any attention to him, including Aaron. By then I'd have been sent to find him. "Gimme nicka," he'd say, and I'd have to decide if I should or not. Meanwhile high-school kids would be watching out of the corner of their eye, waiting for him to leave, trying to pretend he didn't exist because he was too big to push around.

"Gimme nicka."

"Mom says it's time to go home."

"Gimme nicka."

"If I give you a nickel for one more game, will you go home with me?"

"Uh-huh." He would nod in a parody of obedience. I knew he'd balk when the time came, but I'd give him the nickel anyway, and stand there with my back turned and look at car magazines and try to pretend I didn't exist in front of those big kids, either, or if I did, I wasn't Aaron's brother.

I guess what no one ever reckoned with was that some other kids might not be afraid of Aaron. Or at least not afraid enough to leave him alone. When he was little, normal kids wouldn't play with him because he couldn't understand their games, or was too clumsy to master them, and for years he was someone every kid knew about but hardly ever saw. Or if they saw him, he was an appendage of my parents, which made him as good as invisible – until he was a teenager, hanging out in the yard. Every once in a while, there would be some other kids out back, saying something to Aaron over the back fence, and when one of my parents went outside to see what was going on, they'd leave. Everyone knew they were teasing him. Aaron wouldn't tell us what they said. "What were they bothering you about?" my mother would ask, sharply, and he'd just shake his head and look at the ground.

"Show me what's in your hands." But when his fingers uncurled, there would be nothing.

We didn't know it, but he became the subject of dares for teenage boys. Maybe they saw him masturbating. I'll never know. But somehow they got the idea that they could torment him with sex. They'd dare each other to get his attention and show him pictures of naked women they ripped out of magazines, to see if they could make him pull down his pants and beat off in front of them – and of course they could. A long time afterwards, some guy, who had once been one of those boys, confessed to my mother. He said that once, in the ultimate dare, they brought somebody's girlfriend along, to see how she'd react when he took out his penis. He said she screamed and when Aaron heard it he started to climb over the fence, with his pants down around his ankles, and they all grabbed him and pushed him back so he fell down, and then ran for it. I would have been afraid to tell my mother that story, if I'd been him. I think he was afraid. She said he kept his hands in his pockets to stop them from shaking. He must have had a lot of guilt, all that time, to make him finally come and tell it.

We didn't know what had happened, that afternoon when the kids came to tease him for what turned out to be the last time. What I remember is that it was springtime, dusk, a beautiful evening, we had a lilac in our yard that was in bloom and I could smell it as soon as I stepped outside. I stood under the tree house and told him to come in, it was time for dinner, and Aaron didn't reply.

"Aaron! Are you up there?"

I could hear him shifting around, his feet scraping against the boards, but he said nothing.

"Come on, it's time to eat."

"Go way," he growled in a teary-angry voice. I wasn't about to climb up there after him.

"Mom's gonna get mad if you don't come in."

"G'way."

"Look, Aaron, it's getting dark pretty soon, come on."

"Unh-uh."

My mother, in the middle of draining something, shook her head in a cloud of steam. "I can't go out there and argue with him now," she said. "Dinner's almost ready, your father will be here any minute."

My father's days were long and regular; he left the house at six-thirty in the morning and walked back in the door at six-thirty at night, and we ate as soon as he came in. He was a quiet and meticulous man. He made furniture of the kind that showed you were a solid citizen,

massive mahogany sideboards and china cabinets with doors that locked, ponderously carved, built to last generations. I believed he could build anything that was made of wood. I think now that though he was only forty-eight years old, life had exhausted him. Aaron had. And being married to the ferocity of my mother's disappointment. But when I was twelve I desperately wanted to be as in control of myself as he was, and as good at something. I was always hoping he'd take me to his shop with him when he had a job to finish up on a Saturday, but whenever we went there together I was nervous that I'd do the wrong thing and fail to measure up. I loved the smell of his shop, the linseed oil, the pungent sawdust, the smell of ozone crackling off the electric motor that ran the table saw; I loved the silent, self-contained way he worked, the way he never wasted words there, out of respect for the job; I loved the depth of his arcane knowledge and the easy courage with which he ran the power tools that could cut your hand right off. In the shop, there was a right way to do everything, and he seemed always to have known it; I watched every move he made, waiting for myself to grow up into that magic knowledge and be a man.

My father walked in the back door at six-thirty-one and my mother said, "Aaron's out in the tree house and won't come in."

He made an unsurprised grunt and his eyebrows raised slightly. "How you doin', Nicky?" he said to me, laying his hand on my head and wiggling my scalp. I crossed my eyes and pretended to be made dizzy by this treatment. "Okay," I said.

He kissed my mother, who was spooning peas onto plates, on the cheek, and she pursed her lips to signify a response.

"Better go get him in," my father said, and went back out the door.

A minute or two passed; my mother served the food and put the plates on the table. I was hungry. No doubt everyone was, including Aaron, who ate more than anyone. With an annoyed look at the clock, my mother snatched open the back door and stuck her head out. "Lou!" she called (my father's name was Louis). "Tell him it's on the table!"

There was no response. Then I could hear my father yelling at Aaron, something he hardly ever did. "Don't you swear at me, do you understand me? Not now, not ever!" My father did not get angry often, but when he did you had the feeling that there was plenty more where that came from.

"Get down out of there NOW!" There was a growl in his voice that scared me, and I was sure Aaron would never stand up to it.

Silence. My mother, leaning out the screen door, watched the back yard, and I watched her watching it. The back of her neck was rigid and tense. Nothing happened, and then there was a kind of thump, and she said "Lou!" and darted out, letting the screen door slam behind her. I followed her in time to see my father picking himself up from the ground under the tree and Aaron stooping over him, still holding on to the ladder, bellowing "Daddy, Daddy" in a way that made me want to scream for him to shut up. My father straightened up and with complete deliberation slapped Aaron in the face, which shocked my gut and made my own head spin; I had never imagined he would do such a thing. Aaron began to blubber; my father seized his arm in a grip whose strength I knew, and led him toward the house.

"What happened?" my mother said, meeting him halfway across the yard. He didn't answer; he seemed too angry to talk. "What happened?"

"He pushed me off the ladder."

"Tryna go down!" Aaron bawled, his face red and full of tears. "Didn wanna push you!"

My father's lips were set tight. He marched Aaron past us, up the back porch steps, into the house, my mother and I following them into the kitchen. But they didn't stop there; he kept going, with Aaron crying and stumbling in his grasp, up the stairs, and we heard the door of Aaron's room close.

My father went into the bathroom and I could hear water running in the pipes. My mother and I looked at each other guiltily. If we had gotten Aaron in, this never would have happened.

After a few minutes my father descended. We were sitting at the kitchen table waiting for him to come before we began; my mother leaned over and patted the seat of his chair.

"Sit down and eat, some dinner will help."

He put his napkin on his lap and took a deep breath. "I won't have him swearing at me," he said.

"I don't blame you," my mother said.

"It was deliberate," he said. "He put his foot on my shoulder and shoved me off." His face was grim. None of us wanted to look at each other.

"I tried to get him to come inside, but he wouldn't," I said, to break the silence.

My father looked at me and seemed to soften a little. "It's not your fault, Nicky," he said. But what seemed to hang in the air was whose fault it was. No one's. It had been said too often that it wasn't

Aaron's fault he was the way he was, and it wasn't my parents' fault, and it certainly wasn't mine – so whose, then? And if no one would take responsibility, was it God's fault, or did even He fold his arms and look the other way? And if He did ...you see, that was the world we lived in. So no one said anything, because there was nothing to say.

After dinner, when my father was sitting in the living room reading the paper, my mother let Aaron come downstairs and eat. I didn't actually see him, because I was doing my homework, but I heard my mother talking to him in a low voice and some sullen muttering from Aaron. He went back upstairs, talking to himself, after he finished eating, and my mother washed the last dish and came into the living room and began reading the paper too. There was near-silence except for the occasional vibration of Aaron's voice upstairs, saying indistinguishable words. From time to time my father would clear his throat as he read, and when he did, I tried to gauge whether he had calmed down yet.

At nine-thirty my mother went upstairs to make Aaron brush his teeth and get ready for bed.

"Time for you to go pretty soon, too," my father said to me as I went to turn on the TV.

"Can't I just watch for a while?"

He shrugged. "Harder to stop halfway through," he said, but since he didn't say no, I left it on. I don't know what I was watching; the name of the show wouldn't mean much to you, anyway. And I don't know if my father was watching the TV with me, or not. All I'm sure of is that we sat there for about fifteen minutes and didn't talk, and then I went up to bed. I'm almost certain that before I went we both said goodnight.

My mother's voice woke me up in the middle of the night, cutting through the dark: "Aaron!" It sounded like a command. I was confused; I turned over in my bed. No lights were on. Then I heard Aaron make a kind of grunting noise and my mother screamed his name, the hair stood up on my neck and I started to sit up. Before my feet hit the floor I heard my father say "God damn it, God damn it," and there was a slam as a heavy body hit the French doors, and then another. Something wooden creaked as if it almost broke. My mother was screaming their names through all of this. "Get out of here," my father said in a terrible voice. My heart was racing and I stood up, I knew the French doors were locked but I tried to open them anyway. I could feel some kind of silent straining going on inside me

involuntarily. There was a sound of hissing breath, another loud creak, someone fell against the door rattling the doorknob in my hand, and there was a flat crack! sound without resonance, a sound I had never heard, and yet I knew what it was. I let go of the doorknob and ran out of my room and through the hall, into the open door of my parents' room, into my mother's scream which was no longer a name or a word but only a constantly widening O. In the light of a streetlamp coming in the window I could see that the bed was empty, and in the shadow between the bed and the French doors, on the floor, some kind of struggle was going on. My mother in her white nightgown was hitting someone hunched there, either Aaron or my father, and as I realized it must be Aaron because she would never hit my father that way, he tried to push her away and awkwardly started to get to his feet. He had something in his hand that I had to have. My father was lying on the floor in the dark. My mother was panting, bent over, alternately hitting and pulling at Aaron – pulling him off my father, I suppose, but for a moment she seemed to be helping him to his feet, and I inexplicably had time to wonder if she was in league with him somehow. She didn't know I was behind her. I had to take away what Aaron had; I went straight for it, past her, and she grabbed at me, trying to pull me back, screaming "No," but I got my hand on it, and Aaron was trying to keep it, bellowing "No" too, she was dragging at my pajama top from behind, choking me, and something complicated happened with our fingers, Aaron's and mine, and my finger found the trigger and pulled. That same sound again. And Aaron lost his grip. I was holding the gun.

There was a revolting wet sound. I realized that my mother was no longer screaming. Then my stomach came up in one long heave that brought me to my knees, and even while I was throwing up my mother was dragging me out of the room.

We crouched on the floor of the hallway outside their room while my stomach stopped convulsing; my mother held onto me as if I might try to escape.

"Where is it?" she said, when she thought I could talk.

"What?"

"The gun."

"I don't know." I wasn't holding it anymore. It wasn't on the floor with us.

She stood up, but I couldn't. I knelt there, doubled over, with my forehead on the floor, and heard her go in their room.

The light went on, then off.

"Oh God," she said. "Oh God." That was the deepest prayer I ever heard.

The light went back on, and it stayed on for what seemed like a long time before she switched it off again. I heard her take a few steps, but most of the time she was stock still.

She came out of their room and shut the door. "Don't look," she said. Then she picked up the telephone that was in a niche in the hall, and dialed once, and said, "I need an ambulance right away."

When the police came she gave them the gun. It was a big old revolver that I had never seen in my life. She told them what happened: Aaron came in the middle of the night and attacked my father while they were sleeping, my father pulled the gun out of the drawer of the night stand, and Aaron took it away and shot my father. Then he turned it on her, and while she and Aaron were struggling over it, the gun went off again. There was blood on the hem of her nightgown that showed below her robe. She told them I was in the next room the whole time. The policemen, white-faced, never questioned a word she said. They knew about Aaron. I could see they felt terribly sorry for us because her husband, and my father, was dead.

Aaron died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, while the police were talking with my mother. The doctor there called and told her the news, and I could see her throat constrict. She held out the phone to one of the police.

"Ma'am?" he said.

It took a moment for her to get out words. "They want to speak to you."

My mother sat down heavily – we were in the kitchen – and pulled her chair next to me and took my hand. "Nicky," she said, "There's no one but you and me."

I nodded and felt my face crumple up, and I started to cry. I was embarrassed to be crying in front of the policemen, and I cried all the harder because the tears had not come when they told us my father was dead, but only now, when Aaron was gone too. Aaron who should have died, who murdered my father, whose life ruined my parents' lives, Aaron whom I had killed.

Days later, after the funerals, and after the relatives left, I asked my mother what my father was doing owning that gun. "He just had it," she said tiredly. "He got it from his father. People in Idaho have guns."

"But why was it loaded?" I said, even though I knew I shouldn't.

She allowed her gaze to rest on me for a long time. I squirmed under it. But I had to understand, if there was anything that could be understood. Finally she said, "Nicky, do you think I know the answer?"

"I'm sorry," I said.

She drank some coffee and stared blankly out the window of the kitchen at the back yard. "We have to get somebody to come and tear that thing down," she said. I knew she meant the tree house. Half of me wanted to object that we couldn't touch it because my father built it, and half of me wanted it gone.

"If you hadn't shot him, Nicky," she said, "I would have had to do it myself."

♦ ♦ ♦

July 21, '96

This is the mission he's given, the writing on his back: he has the responsibility of creating a good life, a happy life. If one person lives such a life — whenever that happens, whatever that means — it helps all people, it wears in the groove a little deeper, it makes the same a little more possible for others. In the Creator's image, he is able (doomed) to create a reality for himself, and all he has to do with that ability is make a good and happy life. Not so easy.

This book, so far, seems to be about memory as much as anything, and working on it causes a deep heartache which is not entirely unpleasant.

♦

July 25, '96

"The desire to bury hides a much more twisted desire: Man wants to *be seen burying* — wants to be discovered in the middle of hiding." — Helene Cixous

Self-condemnation must be removed from the narrative.

♦ ♦ ♦

Surely you know that I'm afraid to tell you all this, Adam. You must know that. All my life I've been afraid to tell anyone. Even your mother didn't know. No one ever knew it but my mother and me.

It's being here that makes the telling possible. And finding your letter, and other things since I found the letter, which I'll get to, but before I do, I have to tell you some more facts about me.

I must not allow myself to dwell too much on what you will think or feel when you read this, or it will never be written. I keep telling myself this: think as little as possible. Just go on telling what has to be told. And yet I know it must be difficult to find out that this is how your grandfather really died, that you had an uncle and he was Aaron, that your own father shot him. That this is your family. But all this stops with me, the sins of the father are not visited upon you, your life is a new beginning. I don't wish these things, I know them. I believe you know them too. That's another reason why I can tell you now. But that, good as it is, is not the first reason, which is (and I should know it) that the truth always beats a lie.

Meanwhile a jay is screeching in the woods, wind is blowing through the tops of the spruce trees. I can see them nodding. And just now a crow is playing his game of crow, trying to land on the very tiptop of a spruce, the single wiggly growing tip of the whole tree that's waving in the breeze and too flexible to support his weight, flapping his wings as he tries to touch down there anyway, and then when he does succeed for a moment, cawing out to the other crows as clearly as if I knew their language, "Look! See! I did it!"

After you do such a thing, no matter how secret it is, there is no protection for you and it feels as though anything can happen. Years can go by in an outwardly unremarkable way, and still every day bristles with danger because you know that nothing is really unthinkable, nothing is impossible.

I went back to school and everyone was very nice to me, for quite some time, because I was the unfortunate kid whose crazy brother killed his dad. I became a teenager, I lived through the whole soap opera of adolescence, I went to college, I had friends and girlfriends, but my life was not about those things even when I thought it was. My life was about a secret. No one had a clue that there was anything about me that made me different from everyone else and set me apart. I became so good at keeping the secret that I almost kept it from myself, for months at a time, and then without wanting to, I would remember what I had done. It would seem for a moment like an outlandish story that had happened to someone else, and then it would come back to me that this was my only real life: I murdered my brother. It could come at any moment – I might be lying on a bed with my girlfriend, caressing her, wanting her and knowing she wanted me, and even then it could come and I would be back in my parents' bedroom with the smell of blood, and my fingers and Aaron's tangled together around the gun and I knew that even though he was so much bigger and stronger than me, he didn't have a prayer. I was a hundred times smarter, I was the one my parents loved and I had always gotten my way; ever since I was born he had submitted to me, come second to me, and besides I wanted him gone. I knew he had always wanted me

to love him, to forgive him for being himself, but it was hopeless because my heart was closed to him, and that, too, was why at this moment his strength wouldn't matter, he would give in to me because he always had, and I would kill him.

My girlfriend would be watching me with hurt eyes when my vision cleared, and she would say, "What's the matter, Nick?" But I would say nothing. Only go back to touching her and leave Aaron dead on the floor yet again.

The next bead on the secret string comes when I was in my twenties. Your age.

I was sitting in a coach seat on the Southwest Limited, a train that used to run from Los Angeles to Chicago. It was 2:30 in the morning, and the train was standing in the station in a medium-sized town in the middle of Kansas. I looked down and saw this: the woman I had been talking with for several hours, earlier, stepped out onto the platform, took a few steps, and then began to glow through her clothing as if she was about to burst into flames.

The sight constricted my breath, and I watched in a state of terrible suspense, waiting for something worse that I was certain must be about to come. It crossed my mind that she was radioactive and would kill us all, that everyone on the platform and the train was already under death sentence from being in her presence.

Her old parents (I was sure it was they who were only a few steps away) stopped in their tracks and watched this happen; the few other people on the platform stopped to look as well. So I thought at first. But then, even though I couldn't move my eyes from her, I began to realize that the others on the platform were frozen in place. I realized I could hear no one in the coach sighing or shifting in their seat, no one stifling a yawn or a groan in the effort to find some comfortable way to sleep. No one around me was even breathing. Time had stopped. Only I continued to breathe, shallowly and rapidly, and I deliberately sat up straighter, to prove to myself that I was awake and alive in this moment outside time.

She was too; or it was – whatever she had become. The glowing pulsed, its surface fluttered red and orange-white like a bank of coals in the grate of a wood stove. I could no longer see that she had clothing, which was far from an erotic moment; it was terrifying. I thought that what appeared to be her body was not actually something present on the station platform but a hole in this world, an opening into some burning space that I could not imagine. For some reason that opening pretended to be the outline of a body, it maintained the semblance of a human being and either that made it bearable to see or it was still more disturbing that an alien presence took the trouble to maintain this simulacrum, this golem, as if it knew I was watching. The scene took place in silence. What if someone were to fall through the opening, what if the outline should seize one of the frozen children next to it on the platform and fling her through the gap...but I didn't want to think about that too much, I was the only one awake and alive and what if the figure turned its attention to me? What if it had come to get someone and decided I was the one to get? I told myself not to think this. It was too much like an invitation. Waves of glare and shadow rippled on the walls of the train station and the faces of the bystanders and on my own hand gripping the metal sill of the train window. I could feel its attention come to me exactly as I had dreaded, and some part of me just below the navel was wrenched with queasy violence, as if I were in a plane that suddenly dropped hundreds of feet in the empty air. My mouth opened involuntarily, and I felt hurled somewhere even as my body sat on the Southwest Limited – and then ruthlessly flung again, like a child's paddle-ball on a rubber band that would surely snap, but it did not and the rubber band was my gut that seemed to be yanked over the horizon and then indifferently let go. Stop it, I howled inwardly, what are you, I can't do this – but it would not stop, and again and again that pull on my belly came before I could even breathe.

Finally I thought the glare of the outline was lessening, I snatched at hope that it would soon flicker out, but the glowing flew into my eyes before I could duck and blinded me temporarily with a ferocious burning behind my eyeballs. And when I could see again, the people on the platform were again in motion, and the woman I had spoken with, surrounded by her four children, stepped forward and gave her parents a hug.

How did they dare to embrace her?

But I could see that no one knew. She herself did not know. No one had been aware of what had happened but me.

All through the middle of the day, I had been sitting in the club car talking with the woman I watched getting off the train. Her name was Jean; I never did find out her last name. The Southwest Limited was passing through northeastern New Mexico –the high plateau, the land of violet earth dotted with yellow chamisa and purple-gray sage. The earth was open to the sky, the horizon a hundred miles away.

I knew as I sat in the club car that the air outside would smell of mountains and sage, and along the railroad tracks, creosote. Inside the train it smelled of air conditioning, hot metal, upholstery, and deodorizer from the bathroom. The rhythm of the rail joints beneath the wheels had been steady for hours. It's a long way between stops in that part of the world.

Jean was traveling with four children, three girls and a boy. The eldest was ten or eleven; she was the deputy mom, the second in command. Her name was Ilana and she had heavy straight hair flat against her head and a calm, serious face, the face of a girl who has attained the full maturity of girlhood. Do you know that specific moment? It doesn't happen to everyone. Maybe you (and Jessica?) will have a daughter, and you'll see it in her. It comes when a girl is complete and whole, all of a piece and perfectly at one with the fulfillment of her girl self, just before she goes over the precipice and becomes unformed woman. Maybe one can never again attain such purity of essence. The same can happen to a boy, but in my experience it rarely does; the heroic quality is too easily contaminated by having something to prove. But I recognized what I was seeing in Ilana, though she didn't look at me with her green eyes or speak to me once

during her mother's long talk with me, and I wondered if I had once been at such a point in life. Maybe the one who is never knows it at the time, or can never remember.

People have always told me things, because I had the gift of hearing without judgment – who was I to judge anyone else? Besides that, we were on a train and there was nothing else to do. Jean was seven or eight years older than me, and older by a marriage and four children and other things I couldn't imagine. She told me about her life in San Diego with her Navy husband away for ten weeks at a time. Alone with four small kids in a tract house in Clairemont Mesa and all the rest of the neighborhood kids at her house, unable to stay away even though she was strict about how they had to behave. Once, she said, when she was at the end of her rope she told them all to go home and one kid didn't follow orders and stayed behind in her yard; after a few minutes he got bored and began throwing a ball against the side of her house, and she ran outside and screamed, "If you don't stop that right this second you better give your soul to God, because your ass is going to be mine!" I've never forgotten the way she told that with guilty pride. She had stood up for her sanity. Pride, too, because out of the whole neighborhood full of moms, it was her house that the kids wouldn't leave. Somehow I could tell – though this was a long time before I had you, long before I even met your mother – that while she was in the midst of scolding them, she simultaneously fed them and put mercurochrome on their cuts and Band-Aids on their scraped knees and told them the rules of games, and when she raised the kitchen window and yelled out to them never again to hit a ball in the direction of the house, they knew in some way that she loved their being there. Or maybe the attraction was Ilana.

The whole time her husband was away she wouldn't sleep in their bed; she slept on the couch instead. She didn't seem to feel a need to explain that; she expected me to see it was what her honor demanded. Just like when her girlfriends, other Navy wives with husbands at sea, finally managed to pry her out of the house to go out for a few drinks with them, she would never talk to any man who tried to speak to her in a bar. Never even open her mouth. That's what she told me. What's the harm, her friends would say, and the men would say it too: what's the harm in a little fun? But she knew where it could lead. And it had led there, for some of her friends. There was only one way to handle it: you didn't begin. But it wasn't for her to judge them. She was trying to learn not to do that.

She confessed that she got so angry sometimes, she could make her husband cry, even though he was a chief petty officer with fourteen years' service. They had gotten married when she was nineteen. He was seven years older, and had been her boyfriend when she was in high school in Halstead, a Godforsaken town where the only option was to get the hell out. Her parents forbade her to see him, but she did anyway, until he joined the Navy, and when she was nineteen she didn't drive the twenty miles to McPherson College one day but instead got on a bus and several buses later got off in San Diego, where he was stationed, and married him. She never finished college but she planned to someday, when the kids got older. She had been in therapy; she said it shamefaced. I knew she thought it was a sign of weakness.

If she had known how inconclusively my love affairs wandered off into a feeling that someone had terribly misunderstood, she would have judged me in a second; she would have regretted telling me anything at all. Who was I to hear any of this – this life without one moment off duty? I knew nothing about strength like that. Nothing about every day alone with a house full of small children. Certainly nothing about staying with someone no matter what – even though you got so angry it broke them down to tears. Nothing about honor that never even made an opening for temptation. After a while I understood why she wouldn't sleep in the bed when her husband was away. It was big enough for two. But the couch was not.

I, on the other hand, could be tempted at almost any time, or made to start dreaming.

"Ilana, don't let Corey fall off that chair," Jean said. Corey was the boy; he looked about three, and he had climbed up on the slippery naugahyde of a club car chair to look out the window. Ilana, reading a book, absently pulled her chair closer to him and put her hand against his bottom without having to raise her eyes from the page. I tried to see the title of the book but couldn't. If a woman my age could be like Ilana, I thought – but maybe it wasn't possible. I had never known anyone that self-possessed, that calm. The women I went out with were more like her mother in a way – they had something eating at them inside – but they were utterly different from her too, or they wouldn't have been willing to go to bed with me. And if they had been like Ilana grown up, surely they wouldn't have needed anything from me.

No, it was I who needed. If I had been able to say what it was I needed, it might have helped, but I couldn't. The only way to express it was to stay awake and watch out the window of the coach when Jean and her children stepped off the train in Newton, Kansas. And the

impossible transformation happened. When it was over, for me (I was sure they noticed nothing), she hugged her parents – she had said that they were getting older, especially her dad, and she brought the kids to see them whenever she could so they'd remember their grandparents before they got old and feeble. The children, stumbling in their half-sleep, lined up to hug too. I thought the old folks must be in pretty good shape if they could come out and meet the train at 2:30 in the morning. I pictured the family driving down a night road between dark fields, then trooping into the grandparents' house (I was sure it would smell like our old house in Springfield) and the kids being put down to sleep in beds freshly made for them that day. The lights in the windows would tell any neighbor who couldn't sleep that something special was up. Maybe Jean and her parents would sit around a metal-topped table in a yellow kitchen and talk for a while after the kids were in bed. The hatchet buried a long time ago about how they wouldn't let her see that boy, their son-in-law, forty now, provider for their grandchildren. A homely, alien life I would never know.

But I didn't want to be any of those people, really, and I knew it. I couldn't have even if I had wanted to. It was too late for that.

The Southwest Limited slid into motion; the family on the platform were picking up suitcases and turning to leave. The last person whose face I saw, as they turned away, was Ilana, her serious look and her blond hair lit for a moment by an overhead lamp as she gave one last glance at the moving train.

I sat back, curled myself down in my seat, put my feet up on the footrest, closed my eyes. My stomach felt on the verge of nausea. I thought it was probably lack of sleep, second night on the train. It was a peculiar sentimental gesture, staying awake to watch them disembark, made as if someone were watching me and would give me points for – what?

Self-indulgence. You never get any points for that.

If you find what happened on the platform hard to believe, Adam, you have to understand that I did too. Already, as the train pulled out, I didn't believe what I had seen. It didn't fit anywhere; easier to forget. Easier to decide my mind played a very peculiar trick on me because I was tired. Easier to let it slip away like a dream that I wouldn't remember even if I tried, anyway. Although a sinking feeling stayed with me for a week or so that something truly weird had recently happened – truly weird and not at all reassuring.

Then even the sinking feeling went away and I remembered none of the strangeness at all.

But I never forgot my talk with Jean on the train. It was one of those things you remember without noticing that you remember. When you remember a love affair its title is on the marquee of the theatre of memory and you know that you are going in – and sometimes when you get inside you find that the title is all that's left of the show; but this, which I never set out to remember, refused to fade. It's peculiar that life can be shaped by something that seems a passing encounter, a way to fill an empty afternoon. Those hours on the train never came to mind when I tried to think of the shaping moments, until decades later when I saw what had fallen away and what had stayed, and then I realized that moment was more important than some that I thought at one time had changed everything, like falling in love with someone – only the falling in love didn't last, but this thing did. I never thought it at the time, but she became my hero. She stood up to life. She was steadfast. What a man should be. In some part of me, I dared to hope, without admitting it to myself, that I could be that too.

♦ ♦ ♦

Cambridge, September 13, '96

Past or future, the same thing always seems to be going on — making a self, out of the intransigent givens of this particular life, out of resistant physical reality, out of the empty and formless. The job never seems to be finished. And why create a self at all? Even when I can't find an answer to that, I'm driven to do it; in the end I always rebel against being told by others who I am and who I ought to be. It would be less work to let the definition come from outside, but it would be impossible for some part of me to accept. This has always been true.

The answer I prefer is Keats's answer, that this world is "a vale of soul-making." Our mission, beyond culture or psychology. And I suppose I have to recognize that soul-making is the subject of *For Adam*, and has been from the beginning, from the now-abandoned prologue, in which I had the chutzpah to sketch in the story of the higher powers' struggle to supervise human life on Earth:

"The beings who oversee the game being played out on this planet, call them what you will — devas, angels, Powers and Principalities — had resolved from the start to play by certain rules, the first being to intervene as little as possible. Ideally never. The object of the game — one of the infinite number of games that the Creator was playing with Itself — was to see if human beings with their restlessly

moving legs and their opposable thumbs and their enormous ability to hoist themselves with their own petard, set down in a physical world of riveting and incomparable beauty, could become sentient and complete their learnings on the physical plane before they fucked themselves and the planet irreversibly up. The Creator had created them in Its own image in the most dangerous way: created them creative. Made them able to make a reality for themselves, and what would they do with this power they had, which most of the time they weren't even aware of having?

"It became clear early on that the Creator had bet on an unlikely proposition, that the immortals were going to have to make cracks in the world and pour doses of the impossible into it at pretty regular intervals or the game would not even get off the ground. They might have to forget the first rule altogether...

"What raised the stakes of this particular game to unprecedented levels was this: human beings were endowed with the ability to make themselves believe that they existed separate from the Creator. Even though they were infinitely the lesser power, they could block out the presence of the all-powerful. When they started playing 'Let's pretend we're alone in the universe,' maybe they didn't anticipate that one day it would become so convincing that some of them would completely forget it wasn't true. And now they could really fuck up, because here, turned loose on the earth, were a bunch of sentient, intelligent beings, capable of perceiving Presence yet living (as far as they could tell) in a universe of Absence — who were bound to be thrown into panic or despair by the situation — and some of them were so used to their panic or despair that they forgot they were even experiencing it...who knew what they might not do?

"It became clear that the circumstances would require a much greater incidence of the impossible to deal with the trouble that was loose in the world. The immortals still remembered the original goal — to see if the world could be kept going, the battle won, by humanity's unaided efforts — but the danger appeared too great, degradation and collapse appeared too imminent, and they could not bear, after all the emotion that had gone into creating this world and getting it to this point — they could not bear to let it go, and they resolved to throw out the first rule, now so often violated that it hardly constituted a rule; they became like solitaire players who cheat without conscience, moving cards at will to places where they're not allowed to go..."

But after a while I thought, Who am I to be writing stuff like this? The Nagual trying to create this through me is like Schopenhauer trying to spout philosophy through a goldfish.

And still more outrageous, who am I to think that I could end this story by writing the manifestation on earth of the Infinite Soul?

♦

September 14, '96

I think I believe, I say I believe, that the imagination can do anything it can let itself do. (But anything? Anything at all?) Which is a whole lot more complicated than it sounds at first; what it really means is that the first thing the imagination must imagine is itself. I have to create myself creative, all over again, re-doing the job I said the Creator took care of in the beginning. Children come here all ready to tap into the creative powers, but I found out a long time ago that getting access to those same powers again, as a putative adult, in the face of self-consciousness and self-judgment, comes down to a question of courage. Only very young or very fortunate people think that letting yourself do things is easy.

♦

October 3, '96

To a former student:

My current effort is turning into the hardest thing I've ever tried to write, and I have no idea who its audience might be, but Quixotically, I continue.

It seems to be all plot, and I, as you probably realize, am not good at plot. The narrator is writing in some unspecified future year, in a neighborhood like mine, except that practically everything we take for granted doesn't work anymore. Houses have burned down because there was no water pressure to put fires out, most of the trees have

been cut for firewood, all available land is being used to grow food — and so on, which is exactly the problem: once you get started down this path there is no end to the what-if detail you have to imagine, which would be fine if I were my friend Kim Robinson (who writes SF novels imagining entire worlds in seamless detail), but I'm not and never will be. I much prefer (or at least think I much prefer) to get into some simple, well-worn groove like Girl Meets Boy, Has Great Sex, Then Heartbreak (or whatever order the events come in) and then watch my characters spend most of their time reflecting upon their emotions. But no! Apparently I am an artist, damn it, and therefore must attempt new things instead of being allowed to keep doing what I am halfway capable of. Thus, as if the manifold shortcomings of my previous works were not enough, I have the ongoing pleasure of discovering ever new ways in which writing a novel is beyond my powers.

♦ ♦ ♦

My only real hope, as a young man, or the only one I admitted to myself, lay in the possibility that I might someday love someone enough to make up for all that I had done and not done. If only I could open my heart. And the only power that could open my heart, it seemed, was the beauty of women, which was somehow – and this is all that I can offer you by way of explanation or justification – a remedy for all the unbeauty of Aaron’s life and death. I wasn’t just attracted to women’s beauty, I believed in it. I still do believe in it – along with other manifestations of beauty – though I’m not sure anyone else could know what those words mean to me.

I can’t help imagining they sound shallow to you, Adam, but people have to be allowed to find the Presence where they can. We aren’t all going to go live alone at Walden Pond, or tend the poor in Calcutta, or devote our lives to the study of sacred texts, or get rich and then give all our riches away. I’m trying not to think about how you’ll react to all this, but it’s hard all over again each day I sit down to write.

Still I will say this, because it’s what I believe: I was always sure, and I’m still sure, that beauty is far more serious than most people realize. That it is a mystery, not to be explained, not to be denied. As much of a mystery as evil, the countervailing force.

On the secret calendar of my life, eras were marked off, one from the next, not by degrees or accomplishments or jobs or where I lived, but by falling in love and breaking up. Living was about the women I might meet and whether one of them might turn out to be the

one. It never seemed to work, and yet, amidst all the repetition and longing, the dream lost none of its power from year to year.

Some women seemed to know about me at once – that through my eyes they could see themselves incandescent. I could give them that if they would let me. And some did, and then I was always a little too willing to use the word “love,” to lob my heart like a slow, fat softball down the middle and hope that someone would hit it over the fence. I lived for that moment, and these were the old days, when Yes was a language that people spoke more fluently.

God, what naked flights of bliss transpired when all was new and right! Women taught me how to give pleasure, showed me how it should be taken...all that never to be recaptured, never to happen for me again, that is what is hardest for me to accept, even now.

But I never knew how to live forward into the “and then”; I thought there shouldn’t even be one, shouldn’t be any time that felt different from the glorious beginning, wouldn’t be if she were really the one I was forever searching for. Until Carol finally came into my life.

♦ ♦ ♦

February 2, '97

My colleague Doug Perry has been writing a piece on the notion of voice in writing, saying that the writer and reader engage in an act of "mutual creation," and also that a self comes into being in the act of writing — seeming to say that the self one is, or projects, at that time exists only because of the act of writing, can only be detected through writing. All this is of the greatest concern to me.

But writer and reader really don't engage in a mutual creation. True, the writer is playing tennis with the reader and he uses the reader's presence across the net to create himself, but from the first word, before anyone else sees a single page, the writer is imagining that reader. From the git-go, he creates a reader to write to; he's playing tennis with his own creation. The kind of reader he creates has everything to do with the self that comes about in the act of writing. In the original version of the story, Adam left home at age 16 after delivering a tirade condemning Nick and Nick's whole generation, apparently never to return. So Nick created for himself a reader-Adam who was angry, beloved, rejecting, absent, longed-for — and thus the Nick who came out on stage to tell the story was self-accusing and self-justifying, apologetic and defiant by turns.

The hardest question for anyone sitting down to write, the one it's better not to ask: who am I going to be when I start putting words down? That, no one can answer for me. Can I be anyone I choose? (I think not.) Do I have a stable, unwavering me in here that won't wiggle away when I gaze at it fixedly? (I think not.) Where am I going to stand

in order to even begin to contemplate the me's that I might be? Who is asking the question "Who am I?" In short, in five minutes I've reached a Zen koan, and if I try to answer it at all, I'm wrong.

♦ ♦ ♦

I'm sorry if my writing about how I fell in love with Carol makes you uncomfortable, but without it I might as well not write this at all. There's too much to tell to quit now, too many truths that I have had no practice in telling because I thought the happiness of people (myself always selfishly included) depended on their remaining hidden. And I have another problem besides being out of practice: even though I use the word "love," I don't know what it means. If it means desire – I used to talk as though it did, and I might again – if love means desire, then when two people full of need collide, is that love? And does love end as arbitrarily as waking up one morning and thinking, She doesn't excite me anymore? How easy it is to desire a woman without knowing anything about her – the one you "love"...how dare I have used that word so often when I was young? Yet that's exactly the plan, I sometimes think: sex is the Creator's bait-and-switch scheme to lure us into far more difficult things. Like love. Like trying to live with one other human being day after day, knowing that you're not allowed to say "I give up." Like trying to be a good parent. The real Mt. Everests in life, next to which climbing mountains is just a distraction.

Where else is there for love to begin except in ignorance and desire? And in the unexplainable certainty of perceiving beauty, the moment that feels like knowledge and excites longing. That moment has always felt to me like proof that love is, after all, a possibility in this life. One is not in charge of these things, one does not control them, one bows to something transcendent and unexplainable, and then, when it

doesn't last, it is profoundly embarrassing and undermining to have to take back the sacred word, to have to admit that one bowed to the trivial, the transitory. I suffered this secret humiliation over and over, till the repetition was humiliation in itself, and yet I couldn't stop. I kept dreaming the same old dream but almost hopelessly, and as it were furtively, for fear of ridicule and scorn – my own scorn worst of all. But dreams have a life of their own; they won't go away because for a time we lack the courage to dream them to the end. Mine never did, even when I couldn't speak of innocence or romance without irony; the dream knew, if I didn't, that one day Carol would walk into the Registrar's office and stand at the counter asking for an add-drop form, and there would be a kind of glow over her head, a glory I could feel.

She was twenty-seven years old, a fourth-grade teacher working course by course on her M.A., and I was thirty-two and a mid-level administrator at the University of Wisconsin. It wasn't my job to wait on people who walked up to the counter, but I was passing by when Carol came and spoke to the woman who worked there. "Are you a graduate student?" I said over the clerk's shoulder – I had to say something – and she raised her eyes to me and I still don't know where that clerk went. She disappeared. Carol used to tease me that I elbowed her out of the way, and maybe I did. I saw at once that Carol's eyes were the color of Abyssinian cats and her look entered into me and I felt as though, with the utmost joy, I was falling down a flight of stairs without hitting anything. I felt like Duchamp's *Nude Descending*, every single one of them, all at once. When I landed and more or less managed to fit back into myself, we were still looking at each other, and she was saying something about registering for a course but that was not what we were talking about. Already. And I wasn't the me I had been before she walked in. A minute before, I had not known what the rest of my life was going to be about; but now I knew. I didn't know that I knew that, not just yet, but I knew that I did not want for one moment to look away from the woman speaking to me. She told me her name, for official purposes of course, and I told her mine and the corners of her mouth curled up in a little amused smile as if she stood aside watching the two of us and knew exactly what was up. I pulled up her record on the computer and there were her address and telephone number, information of the greatest importance, and seeing it made me try to picture where she lived and then with whom. I looked for rings but she was not wearing any. I dragged out as long as

possible something that could have been fixed in ten seconds, I kept inventing questions to ask her so I could hear her say one more thing. I could have listened to her read the dictionary; every word she used was remade. Her voice was clear and self-possessed, it rose and fell laughingly, it was a grown-up woman's voice, not the flat adolescent voice of the typical student. I ran out of official questions and asked her how she liked teaching and for a bad moment I thought she was growing impatient and trying to figure out a way to leave. Someone else came up behind Carol, a guy who looked primed to interrupt and complain. She glanced at him over her shoulder, turned back to me and the clarity of her gaze surprised me all over again. "Maybe we'll have to talk about that another time," she said.

"Yes." That was all I could say. She smiled the little amused smile and turned away, and in a second she was out the door taking my changed life with her.

She was a woman and therefore quicker. I had been so busy trying to find a way to ask her out that it took me a moment to realize she had told me we would be seeing each other again. Which meant she wanted to, which sent Fred Astaire gliding across a gilt-spangled ballroom floor and rendered me useless to perform my official duties.

In my twenties I might have become a Buddhist, if it weren't for their wish to eliminate desire. Without desire I knew I would be lost; it organizes things, like gravity. The physical world an illusion, desire the source of all suffering – those noble truths are not for me. For that matter, I have respect for the impulse that drives Christians to eat God, eat Christ, but I couldn't do it myself without feeling like an impostor. If you believe, then it makes sense to put God inside yourself, where the Bible tells you His Kingdom is; eat Him and He is where He belongs. Those who do it in such a spirit, real believers, must be made happy thereby. But I am not one of them.

So if I couldn't become a Catholic either, eat God and find happiness that way, what then? The beauty of women. For better or worse, it's the truth: that was God's image for me, from which it was impossible and even wrong to tear my eyes away. It's the hope of salvation that lurks alongside desire, less obvious and even more powerful, which makes the wound from which there is no recovering. I say perhaps too dramatically. Please excuse me.

I had learned this, though, by the time I met your mother: women didn't want to know that salvation was what I saw in them. It made them uncomfortable, or angry, and I kept it to myself if I could.

The first time we kissed, her kissing me back seemed such a miracle that I didn't dare stop for fear she might think too much about how it felt and change her mind. We were both too old not to know what was happening. After a while she pushed me away gently. "You have to let me breathe," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"No you're not."

I kissed the curled corner of her lips, and she turned toward me, her mouth opening to meet mine.

"Stop a while," she said later, taking my hand away. "This is going too fast for me."

She was about to leave; we had been kissing by the door. "It felt good when you touched me tonight," she said without raising her eyes to mine, as if she had reminded herself to tell the truth.

The words fell into a silence; she had already told me she couldn't stay. "You could change your mind," I said.

"I know." She kissed me, briefly, as if we were already used to kissing. A kiss from the future. "But you might get the wrong idea if I did."

"What – " would be the wrong idea, I wanted to ask. But she put one straight-up finger against my lips and sealed them.

"Good night," she said. "Call me soon."

I called so soon that her phone was ringing when she walked in the door of her apartment. I tried to get her to go out with me the next night, but she said she had to work.

The next day she called and said she'd changed her mind.

A week later she invited me to dinner at her place, and that night she led me into her bedroom and closed the door on the outside world, and we were together for the first time. When we made love I exploded like a teenager, helplessly. No such thing as control. We lay breathing together in a trance, exchanging kisses, until she stopped kissing me back and turned her eyes away. "I'm a little scared," she said, and then so was I. I watched her breathe, waiting. She put her hand in my hair and drew me to her. "Not scared of you. But just hold me, okay?"

When Carol came into my arms, my own soul came to me and trusted me and accepted me and I was one with myself for the first time in my life. I held her, in the dark of drawn shades, in the silence of deep into the night, and willed that nothing ever frighten her, most of all that nothing of me ever frighten her, that I might be always the one she wanted holding her when something threatened. The distinction between her body and mine almost melted away. The world we'd been in before we shed our clothes no longer existed; perhaps there was nothing outside her room – certainly nothing I needed – or we had travelled somewhere and if I raised the corner of the shade to peek out the window I would find not Madison, Wisconsin, but some other landscape that I had never seen but would recognize. My palms lay between her shoulder blades, holding her to me, and her willingness to be there, her giving me the trust of her nakedness – the Creation itself giving me the trust of this, its greatest glory – was a new sky into which I rose amazed, that I of all men on earth had been chosen to receive this gift. I knew already that if that sky went dark there would be nothing left for me, and at the same instant I realized that it was already too late to tell her about Aaron, too late to tell her what I had done, that I would have to keep this secret because to tell it would be to risk too much, and that that part of me, even now that the miracle of her had come into my life, would remain forever alone.

Now that I've resolved not to hold back, let me not seem to write that life with Carol was one long dream of romance. Though God knows I like to think of it that way. I was afraid of her, to put it bluntly. Afraid of her judgment of me, afraid of her knowing too much of who I really was. I was terrified of losing her and yet at times I felt trapped under the all-seeing eye of her being so much better a person than I was; I grovelled and then I threw fits of rage because she held the upper hand in our relationship. Her father had left her mother when she was eleven years old, and before he did he confessed he'd been seeing another woman for five. Half of Carol's short life up to that point had been, as far as she was concerned, a lie; she never fully got over that moment. Her standard of honesty was impossible to live up to. Considerate, civilized half-truths and white lies weighed on her conscience. Her radar was hypersensitive; I'm sure she knew that there was something hidden between us. She could never finally give up poking questions at me as if she might catch me off guard and at last discover the very thing she never wanted to know, that she had married a man unworthy of her trust. And wasn't it true? You do see, don't you, how our demons were made for each other? How my fears made me do exactly that which justified hers, how each of us, in the effort to console our own night terrors, would render the other's worse? And do you see what's darker yet – that we must have married, in part, so that these very things would happen?

That too is love. And that's what I didn't know, and didn't want to hear, and refused to imagine, and rejected with outrage every time it

F o r A d a m

came near me – until Carol. That was the “and then.” All I know about love, maybe, is this: the thing that deserves to be called love is that which enables you to live through it.

And one other thing. We never stopped desiring each other. The way you felt about Jessica when you wrote that letter – that’s how it was with me and Carol. That never entirely went away.

We had seven years together.

So tempting to put “happy” there, in front of “years.” But didn’t I just admit that would be less than the whole truth?

Certainly of the years I’ve lived, they made the fullest use of what I am. We got married a year after we met, and you were born two years after that; it’s hard to remember that for those three years we didn’t know that you would be you, that at the beginning we didn’t even know we’d have a child. Once you were born, nothing else could ever have been possible; so how could we not have known? You complicated everything, in a good way; you’ll find out what I mean when you have a child of your own. You’ll have mixed feelings beforehand – everyone does – and you’ll have mixed feelings sometimes afterward too, but if you’re like me, it will feel like this is the one thing that life can never take back. I know I was put here to be your father; it’s the rest of this life that I find hard to understand.

I suspect you think, somewhere inside, that your mother's death was your fault. You were only four, after all, too young for explanations to take the place of magic. One grows up and knows better, but maybe some part inside never does.

It had nothing to do with you in any case. She could have been doing anything when the door of the car swung shut on her ankle and cut her and gave her blood poisoning. She could have been putting a bag of groceries into the back seat. It just so happened that she was buckling your seat belt at that moment. Was it your fault that she was leaning over to do it with her foot out the door of the car, that the car was tilted just enough so the door decided to close? And anyway, no one, not even the doctors, knew what the antibiotic would do to her, after she woke up a few nights later running a fever, with her leg red and throbbing, and was taken away in an ambulance at dawn. No one knew she would react that way, that she wouldn't be able to breathe.

It happened so fast they didn't have time to call me from where I was waiting. I'm glad I wasn't there to see them panic and try to resuscitate her without having the right equipment ready and realize it was too late. They told me later that given the violence of her reaction to the antibiotic, it was too late as soon as the drug hit her bloodstream.

♦ ♦ ♦

April 6, '97

Getting deeper into the world of this book is like forcing my way through tangled branches. Like a difficult trance-work in which I attempt to see that which I am not ready to see and the vision refuses to become clear before my inner eye.

The inner hearing is a bolder, stronger, readier faculty than the inner vision — more able to tap into another reality. I have always had a certain gift for auditory hallucinations. I remember being so obsessed with wanting a certain woman to come to my apartment that at night I would hear the key in the lock and the doorknob turning the latch. She had a key, but what I heard was never real.

I believe that to strain for anything in writing is to fail. But that doesn't mean that writing isn't work, or that it has to feel good. I've had lots of crappy days when I felt I was, as a writer said to me today about her own work, "taking forever to get nowhere" — yet the next day looking at the paragraphs that felt painfully eked out, I would find that they read no differently from all the rest.

I need to spend time drawing the cabin where he writes, finding out what it looks like. I need to get into that scene, learn to inhabit it. Or, if I can't, then I need to find out what scene I can inhabit...try to hear the cabin. Waves of cricket sounds, rustling trees, bird calls, squirrel chatter, cracks of twigs, the building creaks, a distant splash when a fish jumps. His own feet on the floor. His own pencil against

the paper. Loud rain on the roof, thunderstorms, mosquito whine and fly buzz, bugs hitting screens. Bird hitting a window — sees daylight through a window on the opposite side and doesn't realize there's anything in the way in between.

♦

April 9, '97

"Il ne faut pas exagerer." That is what I think of when I think of straining for an effect. A woman I was dating said that sentence to me, in response to some emotional declaration of mine; she said it quietly and without anything leading up to it or following it. Nor was it her habit to suddenly start speaking French. It was as if she said this in another language in order to sneak it into my consciousness from the side and make me notice, or as if it would have been too harsh in English. Maybe even as if it referred to something unspeakable, a transgression too terrible for one's native tongue. Why was the force so great? "Don't overdo it" would not have stayed with me. But *"Il ne faut pas exagerer"* meant something entirely greater, a commandment, a diagnosis. You are lying about your emotions by trying to push them too far and you must never do that again, beginning now.

At once I felt shame. Failure of an ethical sort.

♦ ♦ ♦

This is the next bead on the string.

It was shortly after she died. I couldn't bear Thanksgiving in our house without her, and I thought you and I could escape the holiday by coming to this cabin, that I could survive it by splitting wood half the day to wear myself out, that you would enjoy watching from a safe distance as I wielded the ax. Then we would not eat a turkey, or cranberry sauce, or stuffing, or anything that could remind a person of a family ritual, and when we went home the day would be behind us. It didn't work, because four-year-olds already know how Thanksgiving is supposed to be and you knew this wasn't it. And God knows I did. It was all I could do to keep myself up off the floor.

But what happened came after you were asleep, in a sleeping bag next to the wood stove because the bedroom was too cold for you. I was sitting there with the lights out, listening to the fire breathe, and I had a glass of brandy in my hand but it was not the cause.

It was dark but I knew everything in the cabin – the dark, knotty boards of the walls, the bedspread with its pattern of raised nubs forming geometrical flowers, the gleam of the metal rail at the foot of the bed, the Maxfield Parrish print of a nude girl on a rock under a purple sky – I knew every sock and T-shirt in the dresser drawers and the ancient, faded tennis shoes in the closet, that were only worn for wading in the muddy parts of the lake. And I knew Carol asleep under the bedspread in the next room, the rhythm of her breathing, the smell of her, the size of her in the bed, I knew how it felt to get under the covers with her and take her in my arms, and this would never happen again, I would never touch her again though

everything in the cabin that was not her, that could not respond, was still there. Every carved notch in the insensible wood of the picture frame still survived.

The only light in the room was the brightness of the fire that flickered through the open vents in the door of the stove and played upon the metal fender and the sheet of iron the stove stood on. My eyes were closed but I was awake, and I thought for a moment that the stove door must have silently swung open, because a stronger light beat redly on my eyelids. I looked up and the burning woman was outside the window opposite me, the glowing outline of the head and shoulders, hovering there, too high up to be a person standing on the ground outside, and I can't describe the terror. I did not remember that I had seen her before. Small flames came and went over the incandescent surface of the figure, and though it had no eyes, no features of any sort within its outline, I felt it looking at me. It paralyzed me, it stripped me more than naked. I felt the heat radiating from her like noon sun on a bad sunburn. I was fixed in place; I could not turn my gaze away, though watching her was no protection.

I understood, dreadfully, that she wanted something from me and she would not be refused, but I had no idea what it was and I could not imagine myself capable of anything that would satisfy the demands of a being like that. Glare beat in at me, and waves of heat, and I felt that in a moment, if I did not do whatever I had already made her wait too long for, the windowpanes would break and my insides would come to a boil and I would cook until I died. So would you, still sleeping unaware of all this – and that thought pulled me out of her grasp somehow, enabled me to scuttle over to where you were and crouch over you as if I could save you when I couldn't save myself.

You half awoke with a sleepy protest that fell short of a word or a yell, turned over and tumbled back into sleep and your hand fell on my arm; your touch restored order. Whatever was outside the windows was gone.

I remained there, on hands and knees over you, for a long time before I dared to look up. Then I slowly got to my feet, and returned to my chair, and sat there for most of the night before I was able to let myself lie down and fall asleep. By the time morning came I had decided I needed to leave Wisconsin, as if one could run away.

Weeks passed before I remembered, between one step and the next as I walked down the hall at work, that I had seen the burning woman before, from the window of the train at the station in Kansas. In that same second I knew there was no escape, that she could appear anywhere to remind me that I was under a terrible obligation to do something I could not identify and which was probably beyond my powers. The retribution that awaited me if I failed was also impossible to imagine; and yet at the same time I was strangely relieved. I understood that I possessed a secret that was secret even from me, something that was in me, or that was me, and it was, at last, not the old secret, that I had killed Aaron, but something completely other.

As if by sheer luck (but I don't think I believe in luck, or coincidence) I stumbled upon a job opening at a small college in Boston whose registrar had unexpectedly died. I became consumed with selling the house, winding up my responsibilities at the University, finding a place for us to live in Boston. I had to pass everything in the house through my hands and either pack it or give it away – everything that she would never use again, the stuff I had not been able to touch, her clothes, her earrings, her eyeglasses, her hairbrush. The worst of all were the homely things that were of use to only one woman on earth. The suitcases of the dead. If she had been the queen of an ancient civilization perhaps they would have been buried with her; I had to take them with us, except for the clothing that at the last minute I was able to give away.

The day we left Madison we were late getting off because the movers had fallen behind schedule; they were supposed to come early the morning of the day before, but they didn't get to our house until noon. So on the day we left, we were held up all morning waiting for them to finish loading, and we didn't leave till after lunch. I needed to get to Boston the next day, and I was determined to pass Cleveland before we stopped for the night; so I was still driving when it was starting to get dark, and you were asking me impatient questions from the back seat even though most of the toys you owned were back there with you. On an empty stretch of road I turned for an instant to look at you, to reassure you we'd stop soon, and as I turned back to face the way we were going I caught a glimpse of her by the side of the road: the burning woman, standing almost on the roadway, my car almost grazing her as we went by at sixty miles an hour; I even, in that flickering instant, saw the orange light from her pass over the dashboard, and felt the radiating heat. My fingers went numb; I had to think commands to them to hang on to the wheel, to steer, and I could feel her behind me, or not behind me, but anywhere she felt like appearing, at any moment. Waiting.

I stopped at the first motel I came to, but it was no shelter from her.

Perhaps moving to Boston was my great mistake. Putting distance between myself and the life we had lived, making it the food of memory, rather than staying and fighting it out with loss, toe to toe, on its own turf. Jean would not have run from such a battle. But I did, and when I moved East with you, I fell into the habit of...you could call it daydreaming. I suppose this is the last thing you need to be told, having spent your childhood with a father who had one foot in another world. At the time I hoped this was simply normal life to you, but you couldn't have helped noticing some part of me wasn't always there. I'm writing this, all of this, to say I'm sorry it was so; I know you needed more from me. You had lost her, too, and she was at least as important in your life as she was in mine. But at the time I could not resist the pull of remembering.

After we moved to Boston I gradually came to live, more and more of the time, in a burrow of memory, as if sun and sky were below the earth now, no longer above. I was like a spiritual adept who can plunge himself into a state of deep meditation as easily as jumping into a swimming pool. At every opportunity I secretly unfolded the crinkled leaves and petals of the past; I read only one book, my time with her, though the pages of the heart's desire would not open. I returned over and over to the passages closest to it that I could find, and plunged in. The best I could manage was to try not to do this when you needed me. I earned a living, I cooked meals, I paid sitters, I took you to nursery school and playgroup, I brought you to the office with me during school vacations, I let you jump on me in bed, I gave you

your bath, I read books to you, and when all that was done, I remembered.

I think at that time I felt I had no personal future. You had one, of course, and your future was what I had to look forward to. My own reality was one of constant return, of circling back, a world of memories. Like Carol gesturing for me to come to the door and the two of us looking out in the rain and seeing you, in your yellow slicker and your red rubber boots, standing squarely in the middle of the biggest puddle in the driveway with a beatific look on your face. My hand on her shoulder, her hair tickling my nose. I could go deeper than that: the smell of her hair, the sound of the rain, the sensation of your little boy body squirming on my lap as I pulled on the tight rubber boots, Carol saying to you, "Don't sit down in a puddle this time, sweetie." And deeper yet, if I chose, into the very skin of that day that I took for granted as it actually happened, things I never noticed, like the feel of the clothes on my back and the tick of the mantel clock. Time there was as long as I wanted it to be. There was no limit to the sinking-in; the world of the already lived was as vast as the world of what was yet to come. But it was more than vast: it was perfect. That was what it whispered to me, that was its seduction.

I had long since ceased to resist, although the days I had spent with Carol were thresholds I could never cross, open doorways where I could stand and see everything we had shared, still going on, but never again enter. Maybe the torment of that and what Aaron felt so long ago were essentially the same. That never occurred to me until I came back to this cabin.

♦ ♦ ♦

Prince Edward Island, July 17, '97

Letter to David Chambers:

After much envy of my writing shed, Vaughn had one built for herself, to do photography in. All well and good, lovely building, but I of course had to put on the finishing touches such as snaking the power line and water line through the trees and building a work table and making the windows open and a set of double screen doors (that took nearly four days) and a rack of print-drying screens and shelves and you name it, and as a result it was nearly two weeks before I began attempting to write. Not that I don't like building things but Jeez Louise.

La lutte continue with my novel, an item sufficiently dark, tormented, and weird that I can easily picture a reader finding all three (darkness, weirdness, and torment) gratuitous and hurling the manuscript across the room. I have to say that all of this D,W & T appeals even to me only on certain days. I must at some point have imbibed a bitter pill theory of literature (if it tastes bad it must be good for you), even though I say I don't believe in it; I think I find that notion absurd and childish, yet as a writer I act as if I thought it were so. Some part of me, apparently, absurdly imagines the reader will read "because he should," and IT ISN'T SO. Maybe this is the legacy of modernism, or of my (our?) education — maybe I got so used to reading books that tasted bad, because I should, that I decided somewhere inside, in some uncritical & intractable part of myself, that

this was the nature of a writer's transaction with an audience — what a mistake.

Have improved my own shed somewhat in intervals of not writing. It is an extremely delightful space. I must go — we are having dinner with Vaughn's parents, as we do two or three times a week. Further bulletins on D,W & T will follow.

July 18, '97

Good morning.

To continue yesterday's book thoughts, I'm reading *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, all 1400 pages of it or however many there may be, with enjoyment & admiration. It has scope, it has good will toward human beings, it has humor, it has generosity, it has story in amazing abundance, it has a zillion characters who are round not flat, and it's very hard to stop reading it once you start. IT IS SOMETHING A READER WANTS TO READ. IT IS NOT A BITTER PILL. This is the whole POINT about novels — people don't have to be made to read them! But am I achieving any of this?

If I were smart like you I would translate Moliere or make some other end run around the obsessiveness of self. And self-judgment. But comparisons are odious, are they not?

Who am I when I write a sentence like that? What persona is this?

There are too many I's to be. Which means of course that I don't usually know where I am standing when I try to work on my novel; and even if I knew that, where I stand vis-a-vis the unknown reader would still be a mystery. (Forget about writing "non-fiction," that is, something coming "straight from me" — that seems the most fictitious and difficult of all.)

Do you go through this endless chasing of your tail, or have you managed to cut the crap?

Maybe it is best to do physical things like construction, tree-cutting, boat work. Got our little boat in the water finally and have gone for one sail, alone, which was the most relaxing two hours I've spent here so far, or perhaps anywhere in a long time.

Windy this morning & gray, but now I can see from my shed window that there are no more whitecaps and the wind has clearly

died down to a breeze, sun is trying to come out. Warm for P.E.I., which means anything higher than about 71. Let me now attempt yet again to face the rigors of art.

♦ ♦ ♦

There has to come a time when grieving naturally wears itself out, and after we had lived in Boston more than a year, but less than two – a time you probably don't remember, one I can hardly recall myself because the days were so much the same – I think that time was about to come. It would have come if I had not begun to have new sorts of memories.

At first they were mere glimpses that I dismissed – unaccountable thoughts, the weird flotsam that drifts on distant Sargasso Seas of the mind. Who knows what's out there, amid the forests of trailing weed, or why? And who cares, even. Except that these thoughts kept coming back and they felt more and more like memories, even though they couldn't be. Memories that didn't fit anywhere, memories for which there was no room in the life that I thought I had led. They sneaked up on me, and they were stranger than something flaming outside the window because they were ordinary and yet they were impossible. I remembered standing in the kitchen of the cabin in Wisconsin with Carol and we were making dinner and you came in and said could you have a cheese cracker and you didn't look or act any different from the child, now six years old, who was sleeping in the next room as I recalled this. And if I knew anything in life, it was that Carol died when you were four.

I don't think there's a word for the feeling that made it so strange; it's too basic to need a name. You just don't question that certain things happened, you know when memories are memories, but what if they're impossible? And I knew that I was remembering the impossible, because even if I was mistaken about your age, there was a little girl there too, a toddler, and she was your little sister.

I know that all this has to sound crazy to you. But I am trying not to think about your judgments. You can see why I never told you about this other life of mine. Whatever you think of it, I didn't tell you because I didn't see what good it could possibly do, and I thought it would almost certainly do harm. What could you possibly have done with the news that on some unidentifiable plane, there was another you who hadn't lost his mother? What could have made of a green-eyed little sister who was somehow real to your father but never to you?

Yet those memories were as involuntary as memories of the days I had actually lived.

Of course I also thought I might be crazy. If you start life by shooting your brother, what can you expect? Something had been wrong with his mind, why not with mine? I could go to a doctor and say look, I'm being monitored by a flaming being in the shape of a woman, and before I knew it I'd be in a hospital taking handfuls of medications. Especially when some shrink heard the rest of my story. But that seemed much too easy in a way. Here, eat these, forget all that. And I had to take care of you; I couldn't be shuffling around some hospital in foam-rubber slippers. You'd already lost your mother; I didn't want your father to be a crazy man. It was too late to undo what had happened to me, but the whole point was to keep anything like it from happening to you. Which left really one possibility. If I wasn't deluded, there had been a fork in the road, and I had gone both ways: the road after Carol died, and the road after she didn't. I had been living not one life but two.

In the other life, there was nothing to remember about the second week in October when you were four, the week she died. In the other life, nothing unusual happened that week. The next thing after it that I recalled was that at Thanksgiving she and I were both secretly guessing she was pregnant. But we hadn't talked about it yet. A couple of weeks later we found out for sure.

Once I began to remember that other life, I didn't want to do anything else. I still went to the office, I still wrote memos and made phone calls, I still tried to pay attention sympathetically when students came to tell me why they shouldn't be dropped from their classes even

though they hadn't paid their term bills. I still made dinner for you, and ate the same bland food since it was easier than making something else; the most popular item on our menu was macaroni and cheese. I still read to you at night after your bath. But all day and all evening I was waiting for the next undistracted minute when I could be alone and go on opening this impossible gift that I had received somehow.

These were not distant memories, either. Carol had died two years before, and what I was remembering was the intervening time with her. Her second pregnancy, your little sister's birth – these things were not far in the past at all. The sleepless nights of her infancy were clear in my mind.

Each day a new period of past time, a week or two, would open up, and each day the memories got closer to the present. The peculiarity of my situation only grew deeper. We hadn't moved in the other life; we still lived in Madison, I still worked at the University of Wisconsin, Carol still taught fourth grade. In my car I would forget that I was in Boston, start automatically driving to work in Madison, make a turn and look up and have no idea where I was. Every time I had to tell someone my own address or telephone number I was in danger of getting it wrong and giving myself away.

I lived on tenterhooks, waiting for the memories to come up to the point where I could sit in our apartment and simultaneously recall both the day I had just lived in Boston and the day I had just lived in Madison. And at the same time I dreaded it. Because if I could remember waking up with Carol just that morning – if I should remember making love with her just that morning – how would I ever bear not being able to turn to her in the evening and ask how her day had been? How could I be both in this life and almost, but never quite, in that one?

Every day there was a new day to remember, a different day of living. But living after the fact, because I was not the I who had said the words, who had kissed her goodbye as she left the house, watched you get on the school bus, taken the baby to day care. Whatever that one had done, had felt, I could only live at one remove. I was tormented by envy of the me who actually lived that other day; I hated him at times. Especially when he and Carol argued, when he was complaining and difficult and self-involved and made it harder for her – her life was hard enough with a job and a small baby. The bastard, he had no idea how lucky he was, so unaware I could have choked him. Me. I don't know what pronoun to use. I mean the other one who had no idea I existed. There was only one of him, as far as he knew, only one life,

only one version of his family's fate. His appreciation of his life was feeble at best, his imagination of any other destiny utterly lacking. That me had no concept of what this me went through. After a while I began to see that he didn't even experience his own experience. Stupefied by good luck. I wanted my father's old revolver back; I wanted to hold me at gunpoint and order me to feel every moment, order me to be kinder every moment, to notice, for Christ's sake, how incredibly fortunate I was, or else I would happily kill me, and trade places with myself. But I – or he – that other me was on the other side of a scrim, with Carol and the baby, and though it might have looked as though I could step through and be there, I could no more do that than I could stand in Boston and take one step and find myself in Madison, Wisconsin. I would have to traverse the ground, every foot of the way.

♦ ♦ ♦

July 27, '97

Here's what I keep noticing, when I think about the manuscript. Much as the narrator-Nick may think he would know how to live life better than the other Nick, he can't change or influence one detail of the other life. The position of sitting in judgment coincides with impotence; the power to act resides in a part of the self — the other Nick, in the other life — that is not answerable to the judging subject, a part of the self that goes its own way unaware of any prying or preying observer.

The power to act is "below" Nick and "above" him, in the other Nick and in the burning woman. The narrator alone is left out of the game, to observe, to comment, to envy others' capacity to act. No wonder he wants to murder the other Nick and take his place. Life is elsewhere, and he must leave the narrator position in order to live.

Is this a fit subject for art?

Well, haven't I said to roomfuls of people that when you go deep enough into the self you reach the universal?

But was I right?

♦

July 28, '97

And who writes this? Who stands back from all the entities, narrating or not, and even from the self? There must be "I" and then I, for such standing back to take place. There must be an I-the-observed that is judged, analyzed, psyched out, predicted, and an I-the-subject that would analyze and judge, moralize — and control? There's a good question: is I-the-observed controllable? Or do I watch helplessly as it — he — lives life, reacts to situations, gets into arguments, likes some people and can't stand others, makes decisions and acts upon them, with no recognition that I, right there on his incorrigible shoulder, know better how he ought to live?

Under this dispensation there is always a hierarchy within the self, and not exactly a benign one, but a self-scrutiny that aspires to tyranny. And there is a hierarchy transcending the self as well. The soul, in my vague metaphysics, is a being on some other plane, unknowable, unexplainable, living (perhaps only with part of its attention) life on the physical plane through a human body and a human personality. I don't feel entitled to speak of "my soul"; rather, I belong to it. This soul, for reasons of its own, has chosen to live this physical lifetime by having my body, my parents, being born in Chicago on September 24, 1946, having this personality, and so on and so on. Its goal in all this, I imagine vaguely, is learning and growth, and the conditions of this particular lifetime — chosen by the soul — are somehow peculiarly suited to the learning and growth it seeks through the vehicle of me. So here I am, here's who is writing this: I-the-subject, a sliver of self-consciousness wedged between the soul and an unresponsive I-the-observed. The least consequential member of a most peculiar trinity.

Just this morning it occurred to me, while I was down at the shore saying prayers, that this may be a different version of a mistake I thought I had learned to avoid. I often say that we aren't here to get away from life in the body, life in the physical world. That if there weren't things to be learned on this plane we wouldn't be here in the first place, and we aren't here to refuse to engage. But now I see that the same could be said about what I often refer to snidely as "this personality" (meaning I-the-observed) — what if my job here is not to try to avoid and escape it, but rather to be it whole-heartedly, to see it through? Then all this self-judgment that I think of as an effort at growth and improvement would be more accurately described as avoidance, evasion.

Possibly, then, what's wearing me out with this novel is not only the pain of self-judgment, but its sheer pointlessness. Knowing that this situation can lead nowhere, the creative faculty has no desire to create more after having formed the image in the first place, the picture that carries a necessary message. Read the message, it says. This is an image of your condition.

Appropriately enough, the planned climax of the story, the It that would change everything, was originally to have been a moment of perfect knowledge when all hearts were open, perfect acceptance, perfect forgiveness. It was attributed to the intervention of the Infinite, as a turning-point in the world's history, but reading it all on this level of the self, perhaps that attribution is once again a manifestation of schism within.

Everybody in your dream is you. Who are the cast of characters?

He who acts, yet is helpless in the face of circumstance and his own emotions, he who suffers and delights yet at times fouls his own nest and fails those he loves (Nick in the past, and the other Nick living the other life).

He who cannot act, who is detached, removed, too late, impotent, starved for contact with life, living in the past, whose only actions are to judge, to utter (write) words, to regret, to grieve, to obsess, who is no longer living forward but only standing in the doorways of the past (Nick as the narrator).

The Infinite Soul and other unknowable presences, having powers and awarenesses that a human being can't know or explain.

The rejected and murdered aspect of the self, sexual, base, simple-minded, repellent, uncivilized, hostile, unloved, childish, frightening, dependent (Aaron).

The female presence, the best self, the source and object of love acceptance and trust, the incarnation of beauty, the reason to live — taken away by an arbitrary stroke of irresistible fate (Carol).

There is no place here for sympathy, identification; the differences are too stark to be human. The only person one would want to be is Carol and she's dead, as well as perhaps being too good by half. Carol is too adored, as Nick is too passive and self-condemned. The reader is locked out, left no room to have his own thoughts when all judgments are already unequivocally passed. It's as if I had been trying to write Flannery O'Connor — an author whose work I distrust or actively dislike for exactly these reasons — without the juggernaut of Catholicism to power and justify the story. Here I have drawn an

exaggerated picture in grease pencil, O'Connor style, and I hold it up and hector myself: "See? See, you idiot? Don't you get it yet?"

An image of How Not to Live.

♦

July 31, '97

Became completely fed up with the novel and decided to cut trees instead. This I have been doing, with much greater satisfaction. Landscaping on the large scale. I do like and need physical labor, more than I get at home by far. When I'm crawling into a thicket with loppers and saw in hand, and twigs are scratching my face and spruce needles are going down my neck and mosquitoes are whining in my ears, I remind myself that this is the kind of situation I get my characters into, and then it's fun.

As for my book...

I know certain scenes are worth reading, and there are certain good lines, but maybe this thing was not destined to be a novel and I am just trying to make it into one out of habit. And even if it is one, you can't make a novel out of good lines. Besides which, it brings out a bleak and dire view of life and relationships which is probably the least desirable quality of this particular personality whose run on the stage is fortunately not forever.

So I put away all the visible pieces of paper connected to the book, took down all the passages from Helene Cixous push-pinned to the shed walls, even took away the smartest phrase up there, which was a line that someone said about Proust: "the time between habits." When seeing "the time between habits" has become a habit, it's time to take it down.

There must be a certain kind of erotic attraction to writing a book, or it won't be any good. In my experience.

♦

Forestry continues. Today cutting spruces small enough to be cut off with a pair of loppers, so that I won't have to cut them in the future with a chain saw. It makes a lot of sense. Throwing them, once cut, into high stands of bayberry or into woods or clumps of trees to get them out of the way. After I did this long enough to get hot & tired, you couldn't tell I had done anything – unless you knew – but it will make a difference one day. Then hauled off more brush from previous days' efforts, also put in some more shelves in Vaughn's shed. Hot and still today, unusual for P.E.I., a very sweaty day to haul brush. As my big pile on the shore sits and dries in the sun, the bonfire promises to be spectacular. I would say I have about enough cut brush and trees to fill a small swimming pool.

I like working on the natural space, being one (but only one) of the forces sculpting it. Keeping the trees from growing in completely, creating clear areas, creating views (the Strait, the sunset), sites where a person might one day build. But it isn't really about building; if we never put anything else on this land, it will be fine with me. I'm happy to maintain it for blue jays, crows, foxes and squirrels, warblers of unknown variety, robins and goldfinches, and those few people who walk through. To keep an open space for the grasses and lichens, the bayberry and (I think) alder that grow up naturally in cleared areas, the Indian paintbrush, brown-eyed Susans, dandelion, and vetch. To hold off sameness, to make sure there are two presences out there, one dense and encroaching, the other still open, so that out of the two that are visible there can come into being an invisible third. That is the real action, for me. It goes on at the edge, where unlike things meet, where a person on foot passes from this to that. Beauty lurks on the boundary line.

August 3, '97

Two days ago I got a phone call telling me that my brother, Landis, died. He was my mother's first child by her first marriage, so he was my half-brother to be exact. He was partly the model for Aaron, in the book, but there were a lot of unappetizing aspects of Aaron that weren't based on Landis. For one thing, Landis had no sexuality. He was simultaneously like a boy – from the back he looked like a boy of about ten – and a little old man, and he acted like both depending on the context. He was retarded but he wasn't stupid, which sounds strange but is the most accurate way to describe him. He had a virtually perfect memory for directions, could find almost any place he'd been to before (not that you'd want him to drive the car), and possessed a good deal of social intelligence of a certain sort. He was intensely sociable and charming, and people in our family would say, "Everybody is partial to Landis." So if he found himself in any situation where he could meet new people, he generally was quite happy to chat them up in his own peculiar way, and they would end up liking him and getting interested in him, and he seldom forgot anyone he met, even if only once and for a few minutes. He often remembered things that had happened when the family was together which everyone else in the family had forgotten until he reminded them.

He's most associated in my mind with Columbus, Kansas, because he lived there with my grandparents and we always saw him when we went there to visit (at least twice a year). He was a fixture in

town, known to everyone, could wander in and out of the stores around the courthouse square, "downtown," at will, and if he got to be annoying or seemed to be having some trouble or got lost, people knew to call Mrs. Lowry at home, or Dick Lowry at the store, and somebody would come get him. He did indeed play pinball at the corner soda fountain called the Dari-Ette, just as Aaron was described doing in the manuscript, but there was nothing threatening about Landis, and he certainly wasn't big. He was a scrawny little guy who never grew. He just got older, but otherwise he never changed. The continuity of Landis was unique. A regular person would have evolved, grown up, acted differently, wouldn't have spent his life talking exactly the same, caring about the exact same things, playing the same games of store and train conductor. Landis wasn't like a brother, but he was a powerful link with the past, with my childhood, with the Lowry family (there's only one other member of it left that I feel close to, my aunt Elsa, who's a Lowry by marriage), with the history of my own tormented parents.

He rolled off a hotel bed while on vacation with a bunch of people from the place where he lived, did something to himself – they think maybe he broke his neck – got up, sat in a chair, became sleepy and lethargic, and died. To me this is a clear case of the soul says it's time so I'm leaving. We all should find such a neat and easy way to leave the world. He was almost 59 years old.

I don't feel bad for Landis that he died this way, but I am sad that he's gone. The last time I saw him was two or three years ago, when he came to visit us. He called fairly often to talk about coming to visit again; the last time was four days before he died.



This has put me in a whole new space whose geography I am not yet sure of. Having lost this link to my past – a stronger one than I realized until he went away – I sense that it may fall to me to keep that same past alive in other ways. When my mother died I had just the opposite feeling: I was relieved that our impossible relationship was over and had ended on an appearance of reconciliation. But I had no problems with Landis other than the fact that he could be very annoying, even maddening, to be around full time, for which reason I was a lot less eager to have him visit than he was to do so. And

Landis's death feels different than I think any regular adult's death could, because of the peculiar truth about him that he simply hadn't changed, except to look older – that he was the same Landis I was with as a child. It's as if an aspect of childhood continued on, not in my imagination, not in the form of some house or landscape that would trigger memory, but in the form of a living person – he was a child when I was one, and he was still almost that same child when I was 50. I never thought much about just how odd this was, or what part it has played in my psychic economy, until now, and I'm not sure yet what it has meant, or means at this moment.



I have a feeling of waiting for something but I don't know what. Waiting for some other shoe to drop, or for the consequences of Landis's death to become clear. A feeling that some shift will happen or is happening but not knowing what it is yet.

Robins are nesting in a tree about 30 feet from my shed and in plain view from the window at my right hand as I sit in front of my computer. Just now a crow flew up and lit in that tree with the very likely intention of raiding their nest. I have quite an affinity for crows but I went out intending to yell at him if he tried to do that. One of the robins chased him away, which takes guts considering the difference in size.

There aren't as many crows on this shore in the last couple of years as there have been in the past – I don't know why – but you see them from time to time in the tall spruces, flying around from tree to tree cawing and carrying on their noisy social life. Socializing, and what looks like play, seems to constitute most of their way of life that I can observe. They're smart, and I think they spend a lot of their time playing games.

I have a personal connection with crows that I haven't yet made enough of. They have some kind of guidance to offer, particularly in the area of having perspective, maintaining a sense of humor, and not letting life become one long workday.



Vaughn and I have made a medicine wheel on our land here. It's on a high part of the bank above the shore, about eight or ten feet back from the edge, on an uneven, undulating turf of spruce needles, moss, lichen, and plants I mostly can't name except bunchberry, dandelions, yarrow and, of course, spruce seedlings. The medicine wheel consists of twelve quartz crystals in an outer circle about seven or eight feet diameter, and twelve more in an inner circle (more like oval) that's only a foot and a half at most. When you go away for almost a year and come back, it's a challenge to find these crystals, which are buried point up in the earth and spruce needles, but of course they've been through a winter of ferocious P.E.I. weather and who knows what gale force winds have howled through this particular spot. They tend to get covered up, or all but covered, and in any case being transparent they aren't easy to see except when they reflect the light – but so far we've found them except for one, this year, which has either vanished, or we haven't looked in the right place yet. It's possible that a crow saw the sunlight glitter on it and took it away. They like things that are bright and shiny.

Last year we came and found that in a clump of foot-high spruce seedlings growing half-in and half-out of the circle, a group of hornets without much foresight had made a nest. I was clipping off some of the seedlings anyway, to clear the circle, and trying to sweet talk the hornets into letting me do it (everybody but me thinks talking to them is really stupid and pointless), and I got too close and one flew out and stung me on the wrist. I jumped up and yelled "Ow! You little fucker!" which kind of gave away the insincerity of my earlier remarks to them about how we could share the space and that sort of sensitive thing. Anyway, as I knew it wouldn't, their nest didn't make it through the winter there. Much too exposed a spot. When we came back this year there was no trace of it. Even the nests under the eaves of my shed come up empty the next year, and every year hornets build a new one somewhere on the building. I don't know why this is. Maybe they're only good for one winter even if they last through it. But it seems to me that building these nests must be an enormous amount of work – chewing up all that vegetable matter to make flaky gray paper. I think this incessant chewing for the sake of construction is why hornets are always thirsty. And wasps. Once when I was a kid I got out of a swimming pool and lay down, and watched while a wasp lit on my big toe, drank up the drop of water on my toe – I saw it disappear – and flew away. I'm not sure why I didn't assume it was going to sting me

and freak out, but I didn't and it didn't. Ever since then I've been pretty convinced that wasps would mind their own business if I let them, and the only time one has stung me was when it somehow got in bed with me and I rolled over on it. I couldn't blame it for getting upset.

Hornets, on the other hand, are less trustworthy if you ask me. Or just more territorial.

The most trustworthy of all stinging insects are bumblebees. They are constantly around when I'm gardening, going about their work sometimes a foot or two away, and in years of this coexistence not one has ever acted threatening. I know they can sting, but I know they won't; this makes me say that bumblebees are my friends – sentimental as that is.

The purpose of the medicine wheel is meditation, ritual, and prayer. We went there yesterday to meditate and think about Landis, and I personally wanted to be open to whatever he might want to tell me. I've read in various places that people's spirits are at their most influential in the three days after the person dies, so I keep thinking that Landis, who couldn't communicate his thoughts very well in life, might now be able to get across exactly what he wanted the people close to him to understand. It would be consistent with his personality to do so; he always tried to tell people what to do, or to cajole or manipulate them to go along with his wishes. Probably he has some idea of what I should do with my life, and this would be his chance to slip it to me – I would guess not in words, below the threshold of consciousness. And in a way he seems to have known more about how to live than I do.

I would love to know if the soul that was Landis considers the lifetime just now ended to have been a success, if it accomplished what the soul planned before entering that body. I would love to know what souls consider success. I would love to know what makes one choose to be a Landis.

I, personally, think Landis's lifetime was a successful one in that he connected to so many people and brought them something – peculiar and indescribable as it was – that made people almost universally fond of him. He was both funny and difficult, not necessarily on purpose, but those were not his defining characteristics. In his bizarre and amusing style he was a lot more transparent than less retarded people. Most of the time, you saw exactly what he was up

to. But that doesn't explain it either. What was that thing we were all "partial to"?

♦

When I try to think of the attempted novel today, it doesn't hold my attention. Today it's obvious that there's a lot more to life than the dim view down that particular mineshaft. Death does wonders for tunnel vision.

August 4, '97

Today the weather forecast says light winds from the north. If it comes true, I'll go down to the shore and light my bonfire of cut trees and brush. I have to wait for an offshore wind or the smoke will blow over to the neighbors and somebody will not have a good day – or worse, the fire department will find out that I'm burning without a permit. It generates more smoke than anybody wants to breathe for the hours it takes to burn a brush pile. But if the wind blows from the north, then the smoke heads for New Brunswick and all is well.

I like pursuits that require respect for the facts of the physical and natural world. I like to deal with realities that have their own authority, that exist a certain way and do certain things no matter what anyone says. The world goes its own way. If you're a farmer and it doesn't rain all of June, that fact could change your life. If you're sailing and the tide creates a current that pushes you backward as fast as you're sailing forward, you're stuck and that's a fact. If you fall overboard off Vinalhaven, Maine, the water temperature is such that, life jacket or no life jacket, you will die pretty soon if someone doesn't come along and pull you out. You can improve your chances by wearing a survival suit, but the fact that you can die from hypothermia is not open to interpretation. The physical world deals with us in some ways unbendingly, and that's good: it is straightforward, even honorable. It teaches me how to be, how I have to be in relation to it: aware, steady, prepared. Responsible. Paying somebody else to do this for me, to learn what it teaches, is not always a good deal. We can't all have all skills, but for my part, if I don't deal directly with the hard physical reality of this world at some point, a part of me is missing.

The weather forecast (an interpretation) seems to be dead wrong so far about northerly winds.

♦

Fox on the shore.

Early morning; the Strait is so calm – a rare state for it to be in – that you can hear a single wavelet lap against a rock. You could canoe on it this morning and never worry about tipping over.

The fox comes of its own accord, on its own errand along the damp rocks at low tide; it turns and trots silently away as soon as it sees me. It has its own life, elusive, other. I hope to see this fox on the shore somewhere again; but if I don't, I know it's there.

I harbor no sentimental domestic notions about this fox. It is not my friend. It cares little about me, except for wanting me to stay out of its life. Its being out there somewhere, however, going its own way, is of lasting significance to me; it is a reminder that I need to spend some of my time on earth being, in a human way, a fox on the shore. Not easily done, when I have a wife, an aged father living with me at home, a teenage son, two stepsons, and a family I have married into. All of these I love in various ways. They love me, which is good, and in principle I'm sure they'd agree that everyone needs some time alone. But please, not today, when there are so many things to be done.

What's more subversive, unspoken, less acceptable is that a fox on the shore is not only alone but reports to no one. Its time is unaccounted for. No one knows what it is doing there except the fox itself. Such freedom is magnetic in a fox, a mystery that attracts the mind. If foxes could speak English, we'd surely call out, "What are you doing?" but we still might not expect an answer. People seldom get such an exemption from the human thirst to know.

Sometimes any answer undoes the doing.

♦

Late afternoon, the sky clouds up, the weather is definitely changing, and the long-promised offshore wind finally begins to materialize. Too late for a bonfire today, when friends have just arrived

to visit for several days and no one, me included, wants to go out after dinner and spend hours tugging cut limbs and trees out of the heap and throwing them on the fire.

Some kind of warbler just flew up to my window and stopped in midair for an instant and looked this way and that before deciding which way to go. Black and white with yellow streaks. I think I may have seen this bird just once at the bird feeder at home, passing through.

Mrs. Robin is still sitting on her nest, evidence that the crows didn't do anything fatal, but her motherhood must be a nervous one. I try not to contribute to her racked nerves; I avoid taking the path that goes closest to her tree, and there's at least one spruce I haven't cut down because it's too near her nest. Vaughn says it's okay to take that path because she gets used to us and realizes we aren't a threat, which may be so, but I sometimes wonder what she makes of hammering and the shriek of a power saw coming from my shed when I'm doing carpentry projects. Birds, mice, insects have lived here relatively undisturbed for months and then one day people show up and act like they own the place. Some birds are not terribly impressed; the other day I stopped my car in the road to let some blue jays decide if they wanted to get out of the way.

August 5, '97

I spent half the day on a trip to town (all trips to town that include the grocery store take a minimum of three hours). While I was there it started raining, which islanders have been waiting for. It was definitely overdue. Feels good to watch rain drip from the dense spruce branches outside the small window over my computer, but my bonfire is cancelled again. This too is okay. As Vaughn says, we can leave the brush there, piled against the bank, if we have to, and say we're trying to control erosion. Islanders do it all the time, even though it never works. The rule of thumb here is that you lose a foot of land a year. Big trees go over the bank every winter; their massive roots can't save them or the bank itself, and if they can't, a pile of cut branches is no protection at all.

It's less than twenty years since the land on this point was a farm, and already a few lots, the ones no one has touched, are practically forest now. Spruce trees are wildly successful here, regardless of high wind, long winters, relentless storms. Spruce

seedlings grow by the hundreds in clear areas. Not all of them make it, but those that do survive mature into dense clumps which, rather than the individual tree, seem to be the natural unit of spruce. Different trees in a different climate would be too crowded to thrive if they grew the way spruce do here; but rather than crowding each other out, spruce form a wall that withstands the wind better than any one tree could. Then the next clump downwind from that is aided by the presence of the first. With every few steps away from the shore, each new layer of trees blocking the wind, one enters a different micro-environment, and all the differences are about protection.

Family will be here shortly to have drinks and eat bean dip, and I will definitely not be able to conduct myself as a fox.

August 7, '97

Landis was buried yesterday. We went to the medicine wheel to say goodbye to him at the time he was being buried in Holstein, Missouri, next to my mother. Like every other time I've really stopped to react to Landis's death, it had more impact than I expected it to. I kept thinking of him at my mother's funeral, in that same tiny town, visualizing him following my mother's casket out of the church. There are many things about this picture that stay with me. One of them is that three of the significant people in it – my uncle Mac, my uncle Bob, and now Landis – are dead. They were all fixtures of my childhood, and Mac was the adult man I most wanted to be like. Another is that I don't know if Landis was actually there, although I find it hard to believe that we would have had my mother's funeral without arranging for him to come. A third is that even if Landis was there, I couldn't have seen him, or seen this scene at all from the perspective I imagine it – from the side, watching the procession of family down the aisle – because I was at the front of that procession myself.

I wonder how Landis would have been reacting at that moment. There was a lot of crying going on. But I don't picture Landis actually crying, rather making a long face with a big lower lip pushing out, and a scowl of his bushy eyebrows, and squinting his eyes in a way that seemed on purpose, as if he had learned at some point how to mime an expression that would say "My feelings are hurt." This is not to say that his sadness would not have been sincere.

I remember that when I would go visit Landis, after he no longer lived with my grandmother, he would never say goodbye when

I got ready to leave. He would just turn around and hurry off to something else, as if preoccupied, and if I called after him he wouldn't respond.

Even more than how Landis would have reacted, I wonder what he would have been thinking. He knew that my mother was his mother, but my grandmother brought him up and he always called our mother "Margie Nelle," the way my grandmother and my uncles did. I don't think I ever heard him call her "Mom" or any variation of it; my grandmother he called "Mamaw." But what would he have been thinking about the death of his mother, who didn't bring him up? I never asked; not that I would necessarily have gotten an answer if I had.

Anyway I kept visualizing Landis at the church in Holstein, at his – my – mother's funeral, whether he was there or not, and it made me very sad that he didn't have one. But then, as I said, most of the people in our family who would have gone to Landis's funeral, who would have mattered to him, are dead now; and most impossible of all, I realized I wanted Landis to have had a funeral so he could have gone to it himself. He liked religion a lot. From as early as I can remember him he would sing "Jesus Loves Me" in an utterly tuneless nasal buzz whenever the impulse struck. He would have enjoyed going to a big bang-up church service for himself.

*

Yesterday, after we had our own kind of observance for Landis, the wind was still right and I finally got the bonfire going and burned the entire brush pile without anyone on the point smelling a whiff of smoke. I started off with a heap as big as this shed I'm writing in; it's amazing that you can throw so much brush on a fire and send it all up and out to sea and finish with nothing left on the shore but a couple of bucketfuls of ash.

♦ ♦ ♦

When you were eight or nine, things began to go wrong in the world of my other life, not between the other me and Carol or within our family but in the world itself. The first sign of something amiss was that people started hoarding; but they didn't know at first that that was what they were doing. Sometimes the other Nick would be at someone's house and they'd show him their cache of something, and it didn't seem to surprise him but it did me. In his world, this new state of mind crept up on people; they would begin to notice some particular thing with special intensity, but they wouldn't notice that there was anything peculiar about their noticing. Some ordinary item would suddenly have unexplainable value. They would stumble across bargains in stores, they would find this favorite thing of theirs at yard sales and say "Well, you never know," and then one day they'd look up and find they had three hundred cans of tuna fish, or twenty bicycles in the basement. Whatever it was, it told a lot about the person. People hoarded winter coats, candles, watches, tools, gloves, makeup, legal pads, No. 2 pencils, car parts, motor oil, pocket knives, toilet paper, bottled water. Homemade beer and wine. Tampons. Jars of mustard. Condoms, diaphragms, contraceptive jelly. Especially anything that was small. A co-worker at the University of Wisconsin told him that she had hundreds of toothbrushes, and he thought this was a peculiar but harmless preparedness until later, when she was able to barter them for all sorts of desirable things. Eventually he traded her a screwdriver for three of them. But at the beginning no one in his world knew that barter was how it would end up. The original impulse was much more primitive, as if a lifetime supply of

toothbrushes or moisturizer would guarantee that people would live long enough to use it all.

The other me hoarded tools – of course. Hand tools, mostly for working wood. Because of what he – I – learned from my father, without knowing I was learning, a long time ago before my father died. I know what you're thinking: Come on, Dad, what do you think *you* were doing? You hoarded those tools yourself.

I suppose I didn't really have to have three hammers or two dozen screwdrivers, but they were hard to resist. Carpentry was like a meditation for me; cutting a crown molding or planing a board pretty much prevents you from thinking about anything else, and the hell with Socrates. I'll take a day of unexamined life over most of the alternatives – or, even more to the point, a night. I often envied your ability to fall asleep and stay that way till morning; and I often watched you do it, for company in the hours when the clock stops moving forward. It was you who got me through, whether that was fair to you or not.

Of course there was an above-ground life as well. You had a child life of school and afterschool, dinner, evenings, bathtime, book, bedtime – waking me up on Saturday mornings, telling me to come watch cartoons with you – Little League, learning to ice skate, learning to swim – why should I tell you all the things you know you did? And I had my work and being your dad, which was the best of what I have been and still is. God knows I wanted a woman in my life, but the woman I still wanted was Carol, and in an unmentionable way she was almost there; she left no room for anyone else, though occasionally I would make an attempt. Some of your friends had single mothers. But before anything even tried to happen, my half-heartedness would become too clear, to the other party and to me; the elephant in the room would inevitably be acknowledged, with relief that things would not become more embarrassing, more disappointing than they already were.

The other me lived in a falling world, but no one knew what was coming. Nor did I, but I became fascinated by the unraveling; it was plainer to me than to them that something was coming undone. The hoarding reminded me of birds taking cover before a hurricane.

If he, the other Nick, dreaded anything, it was that his own long-ago crime would be exposed – not the things that eventually happened. Besides, most of the things that happened happened to someone else. Parasites killing off the honeybees happened to some

farmers who had orchards in Washington, and depletion of the fish stocks happened to fishermen, and some people along the Mississippi lost everything in floods, but most people weren't farmers or fishermen or didn't live along the Mississippi. None of those things directly touched him. And for quite a while he didn't personally know anyone who died of tuberculosis, or whooping cough; he never thought about malaria or dengue, he thought yellow fever had been eliminated before he was born. Bad news about somebody else was background noise, and no one listened too closely because it made them feel helpless. If the unlucky didn't get blamed for their own misfortunes, they got ignored.

Students started complaining more and more to him that courses they had taken were missing from their transcripts, that their tuition was paid but he kept charging them late fees, that they had gotten dropped from class lists for no reason. There are always a few who have those problems; one or two were in my office every week at work. But in his world there were so many that it felt as though all he did was correct mistakes; he began to wonder how the system had ever worked right. The value of his checking account would change without explanation, and it wasn't just him, it happened to everyone. He got billed for calling places he could not point to on a map. Stoplights got stuck on one color and wouldn't budge, packages got lost, e-mail would quit working for days, bill collectors hounded him over things he had never bought. But all this happened at a crawl, unfolding in imperceptible increments, it took insidious years and people are too good at getting used to things, too willing to adapt. They keep trying to live with whatever they're handed, no matter how screwed-up and burdensome it becomes. Until they finally realize it has become impossible, the situation is beyond fixing, and by then it's too late to try.

In his world, average people started carrying weapons, or assuming that everyone else was. In Madison, where I always thought people were kinder than in other places, he couldn't go anywhere without watching his back, without calculating every move, trying to look completely harmless at all times; but I understood why he refused to carry a gun. He almost got shot once by a woman he happened to look at too long while he was standing in line at the bank. She could sense that he was attracted to her (and what the hell was he doing eyeing any other woman when he still had Carol in his life?), and by then in his world the worst was always presumed, especially by

women, and their theory of self-defense was pre-emptive strike. So when he came face to face with her ten minutes later, as she walked out of a store, he held up his empty hands and backed away, and even so I think that if the sidewalk hadn't been crowded, she might have shot him – me – anyway. I'll never forget the look in her eye. I don't know what had happened to her to make her react that way, but it was something very bad.

Bit by bit the system that distributed things broke down, worked less and less until there was only intermittent anything: dial tones, gas stations that pumped gas, electricity that came on, newspapers, water, vegetables, cartons of milk. The stuff that people were used to having was still to be had, somewhere, but increasingly it was elsewhere and not now. No one knew if the fuel crisis came from trying to drive up profits or international politics or government corruption or the unintended consequences of a plan to do something entirely different; but it happened. It fed on itself, of course, because once the fuel to power things was missing, they couldn't power what it took to bring the fuel. The machinery of daily life became as erratic as the weather, but the rich – in his world, they called them *los ricos* – lived in high-fenced compounds where everything stayed “normal” inside, or as normal as they could make it. They couldn't make phone calls outside the compound any better than anyone else, but inside they could call their neighbors and invite them for a game of bridge or a barbecue by the pool. They could hire people to scrounge the black market for whatever they wanted. They could run their microwave ovens, their electric can openers, their surround-sound stereos, their weed whackers, their gas grills, their air conditioners, their lawn tractors because they hoarded bigger and better than other people, and they could still get access to fuel and power. They traded favors among themselves like everyone, but they had more to trade, and their own little goon squads to protect it.

Would-be revolutionaries posted fanatical broadsheets late at night, absolute certainties phrased in the imperative, ordering the erasure of the self, submergence in the forces of History, the collective will...but the overthrow they demanded had gotten ahead of them and was happening faster than they could urge it on, out of anyone's control. That was no world to grow up in; injustice preyed on your mind from the time you became old enough to realize what it was.

The Mississippi went over its right bank at Old River, in Louisiana, and started pouring into the Atchafalaya Basin instead of

heading southeast to the Gulf through Baton Rouge and New Orleans. A major fraction of the heavy industry of North America was suddenly cut off from transportation, sitting on the banks of a giant ditch of foul-smelling, slowly drying mud.

But the game finally broke down altogether because of something invisible that no one ever explained. It was as if numbers themselves rebelled, after holding still, stable and immutable, ever since people discovered them; as if they demanded their freedom and somewhere in the invisible no-space of electrons in a cable they squirmed out of human control. If numbers came from a distance, they became wrong on the way. But the cables could not be unplugged; everyone knew that. The last stage was hopeless confusion. There were so many lost and bungled transactions and fallacious records and impossible numbers in bank accounts and crazy windfalls retracted the next day and insane demands for millions and refusals to pay in the absence of proofs that could not be supplied, ever, that trust in communication itself was lost and the truth of what people owed or owned or bought or sold or had accomplished could no longer be recovered and most of the money in the world no longer existed. Money itself was not necessarily worth anything, because many people wouldn't take it. In the absence of belief in record-keeping, people's personal histories, their credentials, their abilities, their entire pasts became mere claims, possibly truthful, possibly not. People had what they had, physical stuff they could hold in their hands, and what they could trade their stuff or their work for, and that was that.

♦ ♦ ♦

August 14, '97

Maybe my getting fed up with the book had to do not only with the painfulness of the subject, and then after that with Landis's death, but with that nasty feeling in the pit of the stomach which comes when my writing has taken a wrong turn and I am writing in a direction where the story does not want to go. I should have recognized that feeling, if that's what it was, but in writing most things must be re-learned, and the same solutions to the same dilemmas come as brand-new, hard-earned insights every time. I think — I hope — that I'm not unusually dense; it's just that the struggle to be in the moment never ends.

The robin's nest, on which she has been sitting for weeks, is suddenly empty. Have her offspring hatched and flown, or did something devour them?

I think all novelists have the same problems. The middle is just plain difficult. There are major parts of life that don't make terribly dramatic reading.

♦

August 15, '97

I had an idea yesterday that is like most ideas about this book: a long passage I had written, what I would call a chapter if this book had chapters, wasn't about what I thought it was about, but was actually stage one of trying to do something else which I only just now recognized. That while it felt pretty seriously flawed or completely dispensable as Thing A (what I thought it was), it might actually turn out to be good, after some work, as Thing Q (which just now came to me). This seems to be how it works over and over. I write a long passage with the greatest seriousness and multiple revisions, over a long period of time, in a complete state of ignorance and delusion about what I am really up to. Yet the way that it hangs together in the service of some other purpose, much later realized, shows that as usual the unconscious has been hard at work all along. Or shall I call it the Nagual. Along with "Don't Think" I should tape another sign to my computer which would read "Never Evaluate." I put things way too negatively in that stuff I wrote last month about the divided self.

Consciousness is an infinite regress; but maybe nevertheless, behind my back, the soul knows exactly what it is doing. "It happens that we name things only when we are breaking with them." (Andre Gide, Journal of *The Counterfeiters*)

The analysis of the book as being about the divided self will kill it if it is correct and exhaustive — if it sums up what the book is about. If there is more that stubbornly refuses to be summed up, then it's alive. If the book is any good it knows more about what I'm up to than I know myself. It felt today as though something was actually working.

♦ ♦ ♦

His last few months at the University of Wisconsin were just a bunch of people who couldn't bring themselves to leave. Little bands of educational improvisers, operating here and there in scattered buildings on the mostly deserted campus whose unoccupied parts were being plundered of anything valuable. The few people left did what they could and what they had to. There wasn't a Registrar's Office anymore; there were no more grades or transcripts. Basically he became a maintenance man; in the hours he had spent hovering on the edges of my father's workshop, watching him work, he had learned more carpentry than he realized. He teamed up with another staff person who knew something about plumbing and heating, and between the two of them they contrived to keep some rooms usable. When they ran out of heating oil, they made a common area out of a couple of fancy administrative offices that had fireplaces; they tried burning broken-down chairs and desks found in abandoned parts of the University, but gave it up as more work than it was worth. The father of one of their students, who had a wood lot, offered them firewood if they'd find the gas to cut and haul it. Every morning they started their fires with the contents of administrative files that would never again be read. At first they'd stop sometimes and pull out something from the sheaves of papers they were throwing in the fire and say "Remember this?" But after a while they just threw them in, to keep warm, to get through the day. He thought it was the best semester the University ever had. Pure learning. At the end, in the spring, he became Registrar, because the real Registrar was long gone, and granted everyone a diploma regardless of how many credits they

had. They had a ceremony with whatever academic robes they could scrounge up, they drank some not very good wine that they found in the President's deserted office, and then they went their separate ways.

♦ ♦ ♦

Cambridge, August 24, '97

Landis's memorial service was held the day before yesterday in Haddonfield, New Jersey, at Bancroft, the institution where he lived much of his life. We got there just in time, at 3:30 in the afternoon, after leaving home at 6:30 in the morning. The place – part of a gym, curtained off – was full and people were standing along the walls. Maybe a hundred people were there, many of them residents of the same institution, but also staff and even a few people from the town. The retarded people at the event were able to focus, to pay attention, to be a part of the occasion. The only exception to this was a man wearing a helmet who had a sort of seizure, or attack, while I was speaking about Landis, but he couldn't help that. Staff members dealt with this in an amazingly smooth, quiet, undistruptive way. I went on speaking after only a short pause. After I sat down I noticed that he had peed on the floor and someone was quietly spreading paper towels under and around him; then a well-dressed woman, who also had spoken as part of the ceremony, put on a pair of rubber gloves and picked up the paper towels and put them in a plastic bag, all quietly, matter-of-factly, without a trace of disgust and without disturbing the flow of the moment. Toward the end of the ceremony a gray-haired retarded man got up and spoke incomprehensibly to the group, gesturing with great clarity and emphasis, having a strong stage presence and command of the moment, projecting solemnity and purpose. He spoke loudly, forcefully, and with brief spaces between the words, or phrases, but I didn't recognize one word I knew. It was like watching a ritual from an

unfamiliar culture, performed in an unknown language; clearly what was going on had its own integrity and meaning – my not understanding it was my problem. The audience listened attentively and without any undercurrent of impatience. After a few minutes someone came over and thanked him, escorted him to his seat, and everyone clapped.

The most moving part of the ceremony, for me, came when the man leading it sat down with his guitar and sang “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,” a song Landis loved and often sang (as often as he sang “Jesus Loves Me”). Most of the people joined in, including the retarded people and me. For years now I have found that singing in chorus with others at public occasions makes me cry; sometimes I can’t even get through a Christmas carol. There was no hope of getting through “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.”

Afterwards we talked with a family who often took Landis with them to church, had him over to dinner, even had him to their house for Christmas Eve. I was struck by what deeply good people these were, so utterly unlike myself, and thought organized religion must be good for something after all. Toward me they projected no blame at all, no sense of “You should have done more”; I think it was interesting to them that I was Landis’s brother, and they were glad I came, but from their point of view, Landis was theirs. Again, one last time, the old adage was proved true: everyone really was partial to Landis.

On the train home, Vaughn and I spent a while looking at a book of snapshots that belonged to Landis. It was made by his father, Louis Hartman, for my mother’s twenty-fifth birthday, when Landis was a little over a year old, and it was about the two of them, Louis and my mother, getting married and having Landis. Of course this led to yet another review of my mother’s tragic life: of her four children three were retarded, and one died at an early age; her first husband left, overwhelmed by the situation; she was unhappily married to my father...I always wanted to escape from the unbeauty of the retarded and from the screwed-upness of my family to some world where people were attractive, beautiful, happy, untragic, unburdened. Now I have only one retarded brother instead of two, and of the older generation of the Lowry family, only Elsa remains, who was always one of the sane; in short, with the passage of time I am escaping, and it leaves me with entirely mixed feelings. Landis, too, if not beautiful or “normal,” was sane and brought a lot of good into the world; he was not someone I wanted to see leave it. To lose such a link with my past

is unquestionably a loss; and yet that past itself was not something I wanted to live through when it was going on. There's no summing this up. Lives do end but where do their reverberations stop?

August 29, '97

This morning the air is ambiguous, humid, neither cool nor warm, feeling different with the slightest change in location or dress. The spirit of the day seems to hover indecisively, or to withhold itself, to stay beyond the threshold or with one foot on it but refusing to cross. It feels like a day to spend in solitude, not to be with oneself, but the better to be out of oneself and a part of the hovering world. Not to be constantly jarred by people and personalities, including one's own. But to be alone and hence able to put up on the shelf for some period of time the ceaseless, the lifelong performance of being oneself. To enjoy for a day the privilege of being empty.

August 30, '97

The other night, while not sleeping, I thought about an idea that I heard first from Fred Pfeil, perhaps twenty years ago. It was this: what if Death gave last call? What if there were an announcement on the order of "Okay, this is it. You have one month to die, or not at all"?

I don't know how old I was exactly when Fred posed me this conundrum, but I was somewhere around thirty. Then it struck me as a true dilemma; now it doesn't. If I had to make this unlikely choice today, it's obvious to me that I'd die in the next month. Immortality in my present state of being – much less immortality in a constantly declining body – seems out of the question. It's not that I want to die in the next month, but I do, in fact, want to die – a statement that I hesitate to make at all in this society. It sounds like a confession of mental unhealth, and yet I think of it as just the opposite. This lifetime has had a beginning and is having a middle, and I'd like to bring it to an end as well. The alternative – eternity as the person I am now – strikes me as unthinkable.

August 31, '97

On the other hand, I certainly don't want to die today, which is a pleasant day of mild weather, on which I have just discovered that one of the tadpoles we put in the pond has turned into a frog who now lives there. I usually don't want to die today. But right downstairs is my 97-year-old father, who describes himself as lame, blind, and toothless (all relatively accurate), and whose fondest wish is to, as he puts it, "go to bed and forget to wake up." Any day that he could die, at least in that way, would be fine with him. But somehow death eludes him, or makes him wait – for what, I don't know, and worse, neither does he.

I remember reading somewhere that after a lifetime ends, the soul feels like someone who comes home from a long day at work and takes off a tight pair of shoes. But meanwhile, those who are left to grieve and relive the past in memory are in a completely different boat.

♦ ♦ ♦

The other Nick's world had forgotten how to function.

The people who were in the worst trouble were those who didn't know how to build anything, or grow food, or fish, or hunt, or sew. A certain kind of city people. Especially those who had no hobbies. It was the skills city people had picked up in their spare time, mostly, that enabled them to survive.

Carol taught for a while after she stopped being paid. Some of the parents of her fourth-graders gave her canned goods, or whatever they could spare, so their kids could keep going to school; but like the University, it became a losing struggle to keep the building open.

You were twelve in that world, and in this; I was waiting for you to go over the line into adolescence, wondering what it could be like to live through that time of life in a world that itself was going over the edge. Perhaps it would seem to confirm everything one felt inside – or maybe only some of everything, the darkest moods, the direst imaginings. Maybe it would be a world of anything goes, as in wartime, for tomorrow we die – or one of clinging to any security.

The other me had seen the collapse of the University and the end of his accustomed way of life coming toward him from a long way off. It was no secret what was going to happen, the question was how to live through it. He took any opportunity he ran across to make money, to acquire something of value that he could hoard or trade for the good of his family. He wasn't too picky about the law, and he took risks I never would have taken. He was something of a dreamer – like you, Adam. If he took it into his head that his family should have a turkey for Thanksgiving, or Christmas presents when there was no

money, he would do crazy things to make it happen. He knew there were people who had what he wanted – *los ricos* in the walled compounds – and he would cook up schemes to take it from them. Hire himself out as yard man, handyman, plumber, anything including jobs he had no idea how to do, to get himself inside their houses and figure out some way to steal from them under the noses of their armed security guards. It made no sense, but defiance mattered more to him than whether it made sense. A guard shot at him while he was sneaking under the fence with a stolen baseball glove – he knew he wouldn't be able to get it past the guard at the gate – and when he told the story to Carol, proudly, she yelled at him first and then wouldn't speak to him for a day. But that didn't stop him.

When you were thirteen, he rode his bicycle out into the country and found a farmer who needed labor and said he'd work for food he could carry home every few days. That was smart of him; he was one of the first people from in town to think of that. Things had to be done by human power that machines had done for decades; there was no gasoline, no diesel fuel. Or what there was, somebody else got. Kerosene was sometimes a possibility; somebody dredged up the World War II trick of running a car on kerosene by putting moth balls in the tank; but even that stinking and smoking makeshift was only available now and then. People on country roads mostly walked, or bicycled, or rode horses if they were lucky enough to own one. On the days when he rode into town with supplies for Carol and you and your sister – eggs, vegetables, milk, occasionally a chicken – and when the weather was good, and when he wasn't already tired out before he set off for Madison, he felt himself to be for a magical hour in a world of peace and safety. Everything else fell away except the countryside, the sensations of his own body that had grown stronger from working outdoors, a growing understanding of what was happening in the fields around him, an awareness of going home. A new way of life was taking shape, despite everything; the summer was ahead of him; it was going to work out.

The day that I still remember better than any other, he took a new road on his way home. It was one he'd thought of taking several times before because it looked like a possible shortcut, but he was not sure exactly where it went and it had taken him a long time to learn the country roads he used habitually. Usually when he got on his bicycle to ride home, knowing he'd have to be back the next morning, the last thing he wanted to do was risk getting lost and adding a couple of hours to his already long journey. But this day he felt strong, he had awakened unusually early on his day off, and he had the wind at his back. It seemed like the day to try the shortcut.

After a couple of hills and bends the road entered some woods, but the position of the sun through the trees gave him a good enough sense of his direction. The road was not bad. Parts of the roadway itself had deteriorated into broken chunks of asphalt, and if that had been his only choice he would have turned back, but the dirt shoulder was firm and fairly wide, and running down the shoulder was a smooth path that people had obviously been using. On many of the country roads he used such a trail by the side of the road rather than the road itself, because the winter had broken up the pavement.

He continued for half an hour or so before he began to wonder if the map in his head was wrong after all. Maybe this was not a shortcut but a waste of time. Maybe among dense trees he had lost his sense of direction. For another while he climbed a long gradual slope that began to tire him out.

With a sense of relief he came to a frame building by the side of the road which, though it had no sign, had the unmistakable shape of a

general store. Somebody would be there who could tell him if this was a good way to go.

He stopped and hesitated in front of the store. Or whatever it was now. The windows were shuttered and the door was closed tight; it was sealed, but it didn't look deserted. The shutters were in good repair, the porch was swept clean, the place looked somehow in use yet every opening was closed up. Not friendly. Maybe it would not be a good idea to hail whoever was inside.

It occurred to him that someone in there might be watching him through some chink or peephole he couldn't see. The place might be guarded. *Los ricos* in the woods. He had been thinking the world had changed when in fact it had not.

The door opened and a boy who looked about twelve or thirteen stepped out, carrying a hunting bow, the kind you use to shoot deer, and as soon as he got out the door he notched an arrow, drew the bow, and aimed it at his chest.

"Don't move," the kid said. He had a crew cut and small incipient pimples on his forehead and he was squinting in his effort to achieve a tough guy's level gaze. The other Nick stood there helpless, as helpless as I was when all this came to me in a form I can't describe, more powerful than any memory of the other life that had come to me before. It all but replaced the world before me. I was building a kitchen cabinet the moment that it came, and I put my tools down and sat down on the floor of the basement and held my head, swamped by horror.

The kid approached, keeping his drawn bow aimed. I – he – it felt as though it was happening to me – could see that the arrowhead was made of sharpened steel and that the power of the bow would drive it through his body if the kid let it fly.

"What are *you* doing here?" the kid said, his voice not a man's yet, not a child's either, putting on a show for himself to fill up a lonely morning, but the show was real and if he shot, the prisoner would really die.

I remember too clearly how he felt at that instant, the sinking sensation, the vision of himself rotting on that road, the cursing of himself for deviating from his accustomed route. He couldn't get words to come out right away, imagining his organs torn by metal.

"I work at a farm up the road, I'm taking food to my family in Madison."

"Come *on*," the boy said, his voice rising in an impatient whine. "There aren't any. Farms up this road."

"I was trying to take a shortcut," he said, hating himself, trying to hold onto the thought that for Carol and the kids he would survive this somehow. He thought of saying *I have a son about your age* but that sounded exactly wrong.

"Whaddya got?" the boy said. The point of the arrow didn't waver.

He opened the cardboard box tied to the back of his bicycle and showed him beets, corn, beans, carrots, two jars of milk, a handful of summer squash, a bunch of chard.

"Is that all? Put it on the ground," he said.

"My family needs that, it's all we've got." He didn't want to beg but he heard himself starting to do so.

"That food belongs to my family now," the kid said, and he could hear how proud the boy was of getting off that line. What hard-boiled story was he on the wrong end of, what doomed part was he scripted to play in the kid's head?

"Look, I have two kids, think about it, you know how hungry you get."

"Wanna get shot with this?"

"No."

"Then hurry up."

He had been standing straddling the bike; now he dismounted all the way, awkwardly, trying not to turn his back on the boy and the drawn bow, put down the kickstand and untied the box from the bicycle's rack, and placed it on the ground, thinking about grabbing the shaft of the arrow if the boy should let down his guard, pulling it away from him, turning it on him like a spear before he could notch another. But the kid was probably ten times quicker than he could ever hope to be. He pushed the box of food toward the boy and in the same motion decided to take his one chance, straightened up, mounted the bicycle and leaned into the pedal with all his force –

"Hey!" the kid shouted. "I didn't say you could go!"

The bike skidded on loose dirt, he hopped on one foot as he tried to pedal with the other and keep his head down, got his balance, thought to zig and weave, to duck the arrow he couldn't outrun, but before he could get up speed his front tire hit a broken chunk of pavement and the wheel collapsed like a turned ankle, he was flying over the handlebars and chunks of rock and grit were driven into his palms. His leg temporarily caught in the bike's frame and when he jerked it free, he felt pain behind his knee that would be very bad in just a moment. He stumbled forward, legs dissolving in weakness –

had the kid shot him? He did not dare look over his shoulder as he kept trying to zigzag over the broken pavement, trying to stay low, trying to call up the image of Carol and the children to give him the power to move faster. He could see the bright sun of a clear spot up ahead. He thought he heard an arrow singing by his head and he tripped again, was on painful hands and knees for a second with the senselessness of it on his back like a stone. What a needless and useless death his would be, Carol would never find his body, never bury him, never know that he had died, like an idiot, for trying to take a shortcut. But even without hope he flung himself tumbling down the embankment into the ditch. He scrambled on all fours into the underbrush and kept going, crashing into limbs and saplings, through vines; trying to run without straightening up he rammed his shoulder against something immovable and pain forced his head down, his legs still moving with no idea of direction until he lost his footing and fell to his knees in the forest.

He tried to listen for the sounds of footsteps moving through the trees. A mosquito whined in his ear, and up in the treetops a couple of crows were cawing away at the top of their lungs sounding like they were announcing his presence to the world. Over here! Over here! Hurry up, shoot him! But they flew off, still cawing, into the distance. Now he thought they were telling everyone to get the hell out of their forest.

He crouched, listening, wishing he were wearing camouflage clothing, trying to think out his situation. There were no rules anymore. If that kid thought it would be fun to hunt and kill a middle-aged human being who happened to pass by, there would be nothing to stop him. He looked around and realized that he couldn't be sure where the road was; he had gotten spun around, probably more than once, in his run into the forest and now he couldn't tell which bright spot between the trees might be the road.

He thought of trying to hide himself where he was and wait for...what? He couldn't hide on this spot forever, he had no way to know when it might be safe to move on. Besides, that kid knew where he was, more or less, or at least he knew where he had plunged into the underbrush...every rustling in the woods made his heart jump, but every time it was only a squirrel scrambling up a tree trunk or a bird flying off a leafy limb. Not a footstep. But he might hear one at any time. He thought he heard a person approaching every other second.

He couldn't hold still any longer. He began moving through the woods, but automatically and without a plan, even though he knew that this was not a good idea, that he needed to orient himself, to choose a direction. But he couldn't seem to stop. The body was moving by itself. Maybe it was doing secret thinking, but did it know anything about how to survive this or would it blunder straight into a trap? Surely it was already making too much noise, anyone within half a mile would know exactly where he was, wouldn't they? And they would find him, and they would – there was a clearing in the trees up ahead. Bright. He was staring at the brightness, trying to see out into it, trying to tell if he had done what he thought he had done, the very thing he didn't want to do, circled back to the road, and he took one more step forward and he was the one who did the finding, the back of his neck prickled before he could even focus his jittering vision on the man on the ground, whose throat gaped open, whose blood was still red on the leaves. He had heard no struggle, no outcries. Death had come without warning. He didn't want to get closer to the body, to look for more than an instant at the face that was so unmistakably dead, that could have been him. Especially not look at the eyes. The soul had gone, leaving an irrevocable emptiness.

There was what seemed like an explosion and he was waiting to feel the pain, and then he realized that the blackness in front of his vision was a crow. It flapped down in front of him, enormous and rusty black, and landed next to the corpse, which it eyed, first with one eye and then the other. It hopped closer to the dead man, its weight on the dead leaves making a sound when it jumped, and then it bent down and pecked at the wounded throat and made his stomach turn. He wanted to back away but also he thought he should drive that bird off before it compounded murder further. The crow leaned forward, grasped at torn flesh of the neck and pulled, tugging at it the way he had seen crows pull out the guts of road kills, and he wanted to scream at the outrage of such a feeding upon the dead. He took a couple of steps toward the crow, thinking to kick it away, but it was faster; it turned and flew straight in his face, another explosion of black, its wings flapping over his head, against his ears, making him turn and run. It followed him, dive-bombed him, its feet grazing his scalp, and now it landed in front of him and turned to look him in the eye. It made eye contact, its wildness looking straight into him fearlessly, freezing him in place. It took a jump toward him and he stepped back. Its black and horny feet looked strong enough to claw furrows in him, its heavy beak seemed ready to peck out his eye. Menacingly it raised

its wings partially. "Go away," he said aloud, and it flew up in his face again and made him run again, away from it, away from the dead man, away from the road, anywhere as long as it was somewhere else. Then he noticed the noise he was making, and stopped and crouched down, but the bird came and sat on his back. He could feel its weight as he waited for it to peck his head or grip the back of his neck with its claws. It cawed – a shattering noise that made him lose all caution, and he jumped to his feet and whirled around, shaking it off, beating at the air with his arms. It only flew up out of his reach and then landed a few feet away. Again the stare. Again it took a jump toward him. "Go away," he said again, as if it could understand him, but it didn't move, fixing him with its glittering black gaze. What did it want? It had already driven him away from its prey. He had heard somewhere that crows like shiny things. Had heard stories of crows stealing jewelry carelessly left lying where they could get it. And was there something shiny on him? His wedding ring? He couldn't give away that. It took another jump toward him and he slipped his belt off, threw it on the ground with its buckle toward the bird. "Is this what you want?" he said. The crow picked it up in its beak, and looking him in the eye wobbled and jerked its head and worked its beak on the silver buckle with the same motions it had made trying to feed on the dead man. It seemed to be pulling at his guts as it did so. Then it stopped, opened its beak and dropped the belt as if it had proved unappetizing. It would not stop staring at him. It opened its beak and another terrible caw came out, louder than before if that was possible, even more insistent, shouting at him, ordering him to move, and there was nothing to do but obey. He turned his back to the crow and began to walk away from it, as quietly as he could, now and then looking back over his shoulder to see if he was being followed. He was.

He walked through the forest this way, feeling the already endless day wear on, slowly stalked by a crow. He could feel its presence behind him, driving him on. He tried to stop once, but it flew up and beat its wings around his head, so he knew that the only way to prevent it from attacking him was to keep moving, and after that he just tried to keep as quiet as he could and hardly even bothered to look around. He knew it was there.

Until, finally, when he took for granted that it was following him, he looked around and it was gone.

F o r A d a m

That is the last moment I can remember of the other life. Since the instant when he looked over his shoulder and the crow was not behind him, there has been nothing. Not one image of Carol, or you, or your little sister, not one moment lived by that other Nick, and all the memories that had come before it slowly began to turn gray.

♦ ♦ ♦

March 30, '98

To David Chambers:

Here is the oft-mentioned and oft-complained-of manuscript.

You don't need to read this thing with a magnifier, as if you were Dr. Story locked in a motel room until you fix it, and anyway I don't want it to seem like work. What I need, really, is very basic stuff (though, of course, just saying that reminds me that I may not know what I need at all).

Anyway, here are my questions.

What is obvious here? I know that sounds like some sort of guessing-game or IQ test, but what I have in mind is that something will be perfectly clear to you that is perfectly invisible to me.

What is missing here? This — even the parts I've rewritten multiple times — could be only a sketch. It could have gaping holes, it could be 1/3 of something I have not yet imagined, it could be lacking all sorts of vital organs, just let me know.

The third thing is this. Maybe, no matter how adequately crafted this thing may become, or may even now be in parts, it still is of no particular interest. Perhaps you don't want to hang around with this protagonist in any case, you don't want him to come to your house for dinner and tell you his life story, he is not someone who makes you hope that he will prevail. And also, maybe if you feel this way you don't want to tell me this because you know it is an unfixable problem

and you are a great story doctor and my oldest friend, so you will start racking your brains for a way to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. But tell me anyway. Save me from myself and my compulsion to finish what I start.

♦ ♦ ♦

When the other Nick died, my link to the other life was broken, and if it continued, for Carol and the other you and your little sister, if that capsized world continued to struggle to right itself, it happened beyond my knowledge. Strange indeed to feel a whole lifetime slip through my fingers, and yet live on. It was loss at first, and then liberation. Nothing to distract me from seeing you grow up. Parents always say it seems to take about two blinks of an eye, which is true in hindsight, but it's less easy to express the fullness of time passed with you. Once when you were fourteen or fifteen (you might remember this) we were at some sort of fair and went to a palm reader, who read both of ours and told me that we were twins in a previous lifetime. I believe that; or at least it says how I feel about being your father. Nothing else was ever possible, nothing could remove this from me, nothing could take its place.

Of course, there was a lot besides Dad to occupy your attention. I remember your friends straggling through the house, sprawling on the couch watching football games, and watching them get bigger and bigger, turn into huge teenagers, young men – like you. Do you remember how you guys used to cook breakfasts at 1 or 2 a.m., and how you insisted on making home fries from uncooked potatoes? They always burned before they got done, but taking the time to boil them first was unthinkable. So one of you would get the job of standing by the kitchen door, constantly fanning it open and shut, to try to pull some fresh air into the kitchen so the smoke alarm wouldn't go off and wake me. I remember your first girlfriend, though you tried for a while

to pretend she wasn't that. I don't blame you for not wanting me to know. A person has to have some room, some margin to become, without being watched all the time – something I never had, growing up under my mother's devouring gaze.

Anyway, maybe I didn't want to know too much; it's hard enough, pushing fifty, knowing it's getting too late, knowing there's less and less reason for a woman to be attracted to you. Knowing more and more about how much men anger and offend and disappoint women anyway. Knowing you're no prize. Knowing the ache of dreams in which, if a woman is naked in your presence, if she allows you to touch her, still you are always thwarted, always forbidden, or worse, ignored; she's oblivious to your desire or she politely tolerates it, her nakedness means nothing about her and you...knowing all that, it was easier to imagine as little as possible about you and any girl you might admit you liked.

It was hard for me when you went to college, as I guess you realized; though I tried not to let it show, because it would just put pressure on you about which you could do nothing, and I didn't want you to try. It wasn't your job to get me through my life. But I felt as though my occupation was gone, my real reason for getting up each day had left with you.

When I dealt with students at school, I thought of you going into someone's office to get your registration straightened out and I tried to treat our students the way I wanted someone else to treat you. It made me a lot more willing to bend the rules. Whenever you came home it amazed me to see how you kept turning into more of your own person, to see how clearly it was your life you were living now, in a world of your generation that I only partly understood. When you left again I returned to a faded imitation of a single life I had led long ago, before I ever met your mother; I cooked for myself as I had cooked then, I managed the house exactly as I pleased. I was a lot neater than I had been before, which came, I'm sure, from having been the single parent of a little kid. Unlike when I was in my twenties, not only did I know where everything was supposed to go, I kept it there. I knew how much food was in the fridge, how many days it would be before I needed more grapefruit juice, which leftover I planned to eat when and how I would combine two of them into a third thing to make them less boring. I had life under control. Then you would come home and tease me about wanting to schedule everything and upset my plans and

make a mess and I would enjoy every second, no matter how I might pretend to grumble and complain.

Maybe it was because you left home that I got involved with Alicia. Probably that's not fair to her; but I wasn't, it seems to me now. We met at work, of course (where else is there to meet somebody?), and for several years I was not unhappy to run into her whenever I did, to sit in her office and talk when I should have been working, to eat lunch with her. She was in Human Resources – a phrase I couldn't stand, and neither could she; it seemed to be a job she had fallen into by mistake. Originally she had taken it to get a tuition discount on courses toward a Master's in Social Work ("the most foolish career move I could think of," she called it); she hadn't completed the degree, but she still had the job. She wore her hair in a French braid most days, as you might recall; she said it took her so long to learn how to do it, as a girl, that she had never been able to give it up. She had a radio in her office tuned to country music, wretched stuff to my ears; she liked the words, always about something that was going wrong or just plain gone. She seemed to own and operate her life with little need to ask anyone how. At least it looked that way to me when I first met her. Probably I looked that way too, which just shows you what appearances are worth.

Nothing might ever have happened if she hadn't left the college. On her last day, she went around to say goodbye to the people she knew, and when she came to my office to say she'd see me around, I stood up and gave her a hug, and then without either of us expecting it (except how can this be true?), I kissed her. I knew, in the instant before I kissed her, that it would be acceptable to her if I did, but what I did not know was that our mouths would open and we would kiss as would-be lovers do, that my heart would start racing and that I would forget about the open door through which any of my staff might have seen us kissing. Then we looked at each other. "Oh," she said.

"I didn't know," I said.

"Neither did I."

But now we did.

From one day to the next, life was different behind the scenes. Something was developing there beyond my control. Desire was out in the open, and yet uncertainty hovered in the air between us; we would

meet, and kiss, and want each other, but I had to tell her about Carol, and she had to tell me about the man she had left and the husband she had lost, and we had to, in some oblique way, arrive at the terms on which we would – love? There was no way to know that. But we were both too old not to know that there might be only so much we could bear to receive. I thought we agreed, before we crossed the threshold and shed our clothes and lay down together, on how much we could ask of each other, and how much we could not. I was wrong.

I was almost as reluctant to tell you about Alicia as you had been to tell me about any of your girlfriends. I remember how silly I felt telling you that I was “dating” someone. Not exactly the accurate word. For quite a while it was like this: she came over on Friday night, and we had Friday night and Saturday and Saturday night together, and on Sunday morning after a late breakfast, she went off to whatever she had to do, and I did the same. Were we living together? No; but whatever this was, it wasn’t dating. I don’t remember our ever having said a word about not seeing anyone else. I would have said whatever happened was free to happen, if she had asked, but we had an unspoken pact never to ask.

Not that I was about to go look for some other woman to sleep with on Sunday or Thursday; I was surprised enough that I had a lover at all, that she kept wanting me, and I her. That I didn’t, after a while, secretly wish she’d find reasons she couldn’t come over. That I didn’t think about who she was not. I could write about making love to her, but I don’t think it would be what you want to read. Imagine for yourself; but you won’t be able to imagine what it was like at my age – I can hardly imagine that I’m this age – after so many years alone. All I could be was myself, no longer young, heavier than I liked, but able to give her – I hope it was enough.

When we did touch, it was a silent asking and consenting that started from the beginning. Sometimes the kindest thing in the world is to touch someone else without words; I don’t even mean sex, just touch, the weight of one body against another. Sometimes it’s as though you haven’t breathed all the way in for years until the moment that weight of another’s body sinks into you, and you know it’s that way for the person who’s touching you, too. And if it’s not, there is no use talking about it.

I used to ask myself what I could say to her, as I lay next to her; sometimes I wanted to call her my darling but I could not. I like you so much, I would say, I want you so much, and more would have felt like too much but that was true. Our lost loves said nothing, gave no signs of their presence, knocked no vase off a shelf, no picture from the wall. They were silent, holding themselves apart; they had taken away their breath, their weight, their touch, their glance, they stubbornly withheld from both of us everything breathing life needs, but perhaps one gift remained in their power and that was not to say no. Maybe absence was even the quietest urging: live.

She seemed to be free of both fear and eagerness, and I thought it was because she had already lost something she had believed she couldn't live without. I felt that was the dispensation in which we were together, that loss was the canopy over our nights. Unhope did not make either of us unkind, let me put it that way, and when we did touch, we both knew that the way to touch was as those who love would have touched for the first time, tenderly and without presumption. But we both knew not to say it – only to give without naming – to give each other nights of what it would be like, if love was what this was, and let the kindness of that giving be enough. Be, maybe, the unspoken word.

I remember one Saturday morning not long after we were first together. I got up and went to the bathroom and came back and found her still asleep, her face turned toward me, more unguarded than I had ever seen her, and the sun was inching across the bed to shine on the back of her neck. I stopped halfway to her, to contemplate her as long as I might be allowed to. She appeared to be concentrating on a dream that was trying to slip away; I could see it wrinkling her forehead. It was about a life still in the future that would be, at last, hers. That I knew. Without realizing it, she trusted me in that moment with the face of her youth.

She stirred; her eyelids fluttered. That would have been the moment to tell her I was falling in love with her; or some moment after that, but not too long after, not as long as I did wait.

♦ ♦ ♦

June 18, '98

For whom am I writing this anyway? Surely not for "the reader," if "the reader" is precisely that one with whom I have no relationship at all, one who by definition never responds. That would be like saying that I write novels for no one.

And why such stubborn resistance to saying I write this for myself?

No matter what I tell myself as I sit here, moment by moment, in the act of writing, on some barely conscious level the writing is a performance, and performance implies audience. If I were a dancer and I went into the studio alone and improvised the beginnings of a part, it would imply an audience. Writing this journal implies an audience (an endlessly receptive one at that). Someone there, across a gap, not oneself in the mirror — aye, there's the rub — and what happens on the other side is unknown, and isn't it becoming clear that the only thing I can possibly know or do lies on this side of the gap? But I cannot escape this inordinate ambition: to write that which will matter to someone. And without knowing who "someone" is, how could I possibly know what will matter?

♦

Thought up a whole different version of the plot in which Nick was not Adam's father, but rather his stepfather. Worse yet, instead of Carol dying, she fell out of love with him, he had an affair, Adam found out and spilled the beans, they got divorced, blah blah, on and on. Sounded just like a plot. For some reason I became enamored of it, but it only took about two days of trying to write it to realize that only futile drudgery lay down that path. The characters refused to care about any of it, and I realized that I did not care, and presumably the reader, whose unknowable opinion I cannot dismiss, would not care either.

♦ ♦ ♦

I guess what I should be trying to explain to you is why Alicia and I didn't get married. I know you hoped we would, and I recognize the impulse. You had graduated from college, you had a life of your own to live – though I still don't understand what it means to be a "Web site content provider," except that you know some stuff the other people at the company don't. You'll have to try explaining it to me yet again. But anyway I'm aware that if somebody else would take care of some of my emotional needs, there wouldn't be as much pressure on you. At least that is why I wished my mother would remarry, until I realized all that was over and done with for her. Life with Aaron had beaten the memory of youth out of her, and without that, I wonder if it is possible to love. Probably your motive was much more generous than mine. I know you liked Alicia once you got to know her, and could have felt okay about coming home and finding her a part of it.

What struck me the first time the two of you met was that she didn't have to remind herself that you were an adult. I remember her asking your opinion about something political that was in the paper, and you got into a discussion about it; I wasn't even needed to grease the wheels of conversation. She wasn't afraid to disagree with you, either, and I think both of us respected her for that.

I guess my mistake was that I thought the independence was what she wanted. She had it when we met and she kept it; we seldom went to her house except to pick things up, we almost never spent the night there. She lived in the rented attic of a suburban carriage house. Too small, she said, my place was more comfortable; but I was convinced she wanted to keep it hers alone, and I had no trouble

understanding that. If anything, it surprised me that I wanted her at my house so often, but I did, and she didn't seem to get tired of me. To me her apartment represented a life I wasn't supposed to intrude upon, wasn't supposed to ask about; what she did when we were apart was her business, and I was convinced she wanted it that way.

I more than liked her separateness: I depended on it, I needed it to make the rest possible; so it came as a huge bewilderment when I discovered she maintained it only, you might say, for defensive purposes, as a foxhole to run back to, and wanted to give it up. To move in with me. To make (she didn't say it, but she didn't have to) a life together. She was still just young enough to have a child (she didn't say that either) – I saw it all, or thought I saw it all.

What I failed to see was that I loved her. At the crucial time I never said the word, the one I said too often in my youth, and too seldom – I discover too late – in what will soon be my age. It was obscured by fights in which I found myself carrying a flag of cowardice, on which was written Things Are Fine The Way They Are. I can't forget her voice quavering with angry tears, but unceasing, breaking over me, unanswerable. God forbid somebody should fall in love with you, then they wouldn't go away, and where would you be then? It's what happens when you make love to the same person week after week, or didn't you know that? All I ever did was give you everything you asked for, it's unforgivable isn't it...

To disappoint someone later in life is a deadlier thing, not to be forgiven unless the disappointed one is made whole again – should that even be possible, and should one ever get the chance. I tried, not hard enough, by writing her a letter just before I left to come here, telling her that I realized I had loved her all along. And then once from the road I tried to call her; she didn't pick up, and what do you say to an answering machine? I asked if she had read my letter and then I heard myself about to add that I didn't know when I would be back and I thought, You damn fool, you are no good to her and she knows it, and hung up.

Out of all the schools in Boston, it turns out that I bet on the wrong one. Even when you were in college, mine had already started the slow decline that in the end proved to be terminal. Of course we didn't know it at the time, and we kept changing presidents thinking it would help, and each new president would organize task forces and self-studies which ate up my time churning out enrollment data which always said the same thing: we didn't have enough students. Nominally we charged a fortune in tuition; the truth was no one ever paid that fortune because we gave most of it back in scholarships just to get a freshman class to walk through the door. You can only do that for so long. It wasn't a bad school – our faculty was certainly good enough – but it was small, and undistinguished, and unimaginative, neither a party school nor a temple of the intellect – unable to compete with its neighbors that all were bigger, smarter, more fun, more able to confer some kind of prestige. Also the babies of eighteen years before had mostly chosen to be born in the West and the South, and if they went to Boston to college, they went to someplace they'd heard of, and that wasn't us. People were vaguely surprised that the college still existed. Not that we didn't have some good students; all colleges do. But we didn't have enough students, good or indifferent, to keep a college open.

Institutions die slow deaths; or perhaps it's more accurate to say that they totter on in denial, zombie-like, pretending to live for a while after they've actually died. The college was in the zombie phase for three or four years before the trustees threw in the towel; yet it felt as though the end came suddenly after all.

They were decent to me; I got severance pay of almost half a year's salary in consideration of the twenty years I worked there.

I've only been inside once since I finished straightening up the academic records once and for all. The trustees have sold the buildings to a neighboring school, and the main college building is being gutted for total renovation. I went there on a whim one day and noticed a hard hat sitting on the steps, so I put it on and walked in as if I belonged there. Mortar and ceiling tile and file drawers and old textbooks and pieces of broken swivel chairs were being hurled out of windows to bang their way down orange plastic chutes into dumpsters below, a crane was taking a chunk out of the second floor wall for some future improvement, there were no windows in the frames (I knew why, remembering how often they had gotten stuck) and the wind blew grit everywhere in the halls. There were no tiles in the old ceiling grids; nothing anymore hid the ducts of the defunct heating system that had never worked right in my memory. Pieces of conduit hung down but there seemed to be no electricity in the wires squiggling at their ends; yellow cable snaked everywhere, hung with emergency lights in yellow plastic cages. Here and there water leaked and puddled, and the wet soles of work boots left prints in the plaster dust that covered the floor. I wasn't sure what I would do next in life, and I still don't know, but I'm not sorry that there is no place for me in that building anymore.

♦ ♦ ♦

July 4, '98

Independence Day. Today, despite David's advice that I should continue, I collected all the various versions of *For Adam* at various stages, the notes, the time lines, the drawings, everything, put them in a box, and stowed the box in the attic under the eaves along with the other boxes of old manuscripts. Enough. There is no point in continuing to drag this writing out just to avoid the sensation of leaving an unfinished task.

♦ ♦ ♦

I found myself – I find myself – with no place that I have to be. You have your own life to live, Alicia and I have apparently broken up for good, my job no longer exists; I hope you'll want to visit me, but beyond that I am, shall we say, not required. When I looked around after the college closed and asked myself what I wanted to do next, knowing that it was entirely up to me, I found it was not an easy question to answer.

I really didn't know what I was going to do when I left home; I just stopped the mail and the newspaper, put the lights on timers, locked the doors and left. Summer vacation, if anyone thinks to wonder where I've gone. I stood by the loaded-up car in the driveway and realized I hadn't thought past the moment of turning the key and driving away. Which direction was I going to go? North, as Stuart Little said in that book which I read to you at least twice, is a good direction; but I had no one to see in Maine. South sounded hot; west was the direction of least resistance. It's where I came from, at the beginning of this twenty-year chapter of my life which now seems to be at an end. I guess I should have told you I was coming to the Midwest, once I figured out that was where I was headed. But somehow I felt self-conscious about you being there in Chicago, knowing that your father was prowling around aimlessly somewhere in Illinois or Wisconsin, instead of staying in Boston where I belonged.

But maybe I didn't belong anyplace. I had moved to Boston to get away from Carol's death, but it hadn't worked; the loss of her had followed me in a form I couldn't have imagined. Then that, too, had gone; the silver cord that connected that other life with mine had snapped when the other Nick died in the woods. Nevertheless, driving west, I kept toying with the notion that another life still continued in Madison, that I could slip through a crack between worlds and find myself there for good. Not possible, I knew that, but the direction I was driving in made it look as though I was going back and it was hard not to wonder what I was going back to. I wondered if I could find the spot where he died, if I should place some sort of marker there. The day it happened, I might have believed that Carol and you and your little sister still lived on in Madison, abandoned, in need of my help, that it was time for me to make the leap – but you were my anchor, and if it crossed my mind, you kept me from making that mad journey a long time ago.

So it wasn't that I started believing again in the other life as I drove; but I kept imagining what it would be like if I did. If I were on my way to Carol, after all this time. How would I tell her the story of my last twenty years, and what would I say about Alicia? I tried to imagine Carol's life since the last day I could remember, and the story of the world she lived in – where would I cross the invisible line and find myself in an America after the Collapse? I would be no help at all there, to her or myself, totally unprepared for such a life except for a few carpentry skills. That would not be a world for me.

For about five minutes, when I finally walked down the block we had lived on in Madison, when I saw the house, set foot on its porch, knocked at the door, it was as if I was coming home in the other reality. I knew it was not so and yet the illusion was seamless. Then someone pulled aside the edge of the curtain that covered the window in the front door.

A woman – most certainly not Carol, definitely older than me – peered out warily. I looked back, trying to seem unthreatening. “Hi,” I said, holding up my hand, palm toward her.

“Who are you?” she said through the glass.

“My name’s Nick, I used to live here.”

I saw her frown. “What?”

“I lived here years ago, I just wanted to see the place.” “Arra marna murmla?” she said, with a sour look.

“What? I can’t hear you.”

She said a name – “Al Goldring,” or some name like that.

“Who?” What did she mean, did she want me to say I was him? “I’m Nick Kaiulani,” I said, as plainly as I could.

“I don’t know you,” she said, and the curtain went back in place. I stood facing the closed door. It was the same front door that I remembered, but in bad shape, with peeling paint and gouges in the wood. Different curtain. I could see a darker area on the edge of the fabric where she was in the habit of pulling it aside to look out.

She did so again, checking to see if I was gone. Not happy that I was still there. “My son will be back soon,” she called out through the glass, in an angry voice as if threatening me with him. “You talk to him.”

Afraid. Of course. Many people are, and she was clearly alone in the house. Maybe she didn’t even have a son.

Ever since I had left Boston, in the back of my mind there had been a little scene of myself walking around our house, seeing it again from all sides, after all these years, and this would have been the moment when it would happen. But it would terrify her. The place emanated fear and slow decay. I didn’t want to feel that. It was better to get off of that porch, off of that block, to decide that this was not the destination of my trip.

I gave myself a little tour of Madison, or tried to – the school where Carol taught, the offices where I worked at the University, the park on Lake Mendota that we used to go to with you – but everything

F o r A d a m

I looked for had changed or vanished. After a couple of days I realized there was only one place that would not have altered, and that was how I came here, to this cabin, where I sit now writing this to you.

♦ ♦ ♦

January 3, '99

Since the fall of 1995 this thing has been, what shall I say, "in progress"? Progress is the last thing this manuscript has made. Like a crab, it only moves sideways. Each time I imagine that I finally understand what it is (and that is the problem, to grasp the most basic: what is it about? what is its shape?), that understanding lasts only through a few efforts to carry it out. Then another moment of "Oh! NOW I get it!" and then a new version of what this book is trying to be, to be discarded in its turn. After enough repetitions of the cycle I decide that whatever this is, it doesn't work; then "I give up" is followed by "I take it back" — and so on, apparently without end.

♦ ♦ ♦

When I first bought this place from Arne Lerstein, it didn't even have running water. Ironical, considering how much water was right at our front door. It didn't have a bedroom or a screen porch, either; it was a one-room cabin. You cooked on a wood stove, you got water by hand, cranking it up out of the cistern with the chain pump, and your toilet was an outhouse. If you needed to keep something cold, either you went to town and got some ice, or you put it in a bucket in the lake and hoped for the best. His dad built it, and according to Arne, when he went there as a kid, they mostly ate recently caught fish. Arne was a farmer like his dad, but neither fishing nor the cabin appealed to him much; after he sold it to us, he bought himself a camper that had air conditioning, TV, and a microwave oven.

It didn't take me long to figure out that Carol was not an outhouse sort of woman. We had a septic system put in, and ran electricity in from the county road, and bought a stove and a propane tank. And we had a well drilled. But luckily, I left the cistern, and the downspout leading to it, and the chain pump, out of some liking for old ways of doing things, or in case the power went out. Well, the power is out, because I didn't think to call and get it turned on. The pump still works – not very well, but there are still enough of the hard rubber balls left on the chain to pull and push water up the pipe and out the spigot. Otherwise I'd have to carry it up bucket by bucket from the lake. I guess it must be safe to drink; I feel okay so far. Just a whole lot older than the last time I was here.

When I was in my thirties, I remember people my age would say about someone sixty, "Well, that's not *really* very old." Of course that was a lie; sixty was so old they thought they'd never be sixty themselves. Now I'm practically there, and it surprises me, stupidly enough. Did I think I wasn't going to get older? Or did I think that after everything that had already happened getting older wouldn't matter?

But enough of that. I have no time to waste worrying about how old I'm getting, or writing it down. The summer is short up here, and I have to make the most of every night and day, discovering what I can, and recording it, for as long as it lasts. Did this happen to you, too, Adam, when you were here, or has it only just now begun?

Let me tell you some of what has happened to me here, in this cabin of all possible lives, this cabin of secrets.

Night here is truly night. I found a few candles, but I save them for when they're absolutely necessary; and anyway I prefer the darkness. I never saw true darkness when I was growing up. On cloudy nights here all is blackness, a dark so dark that random nerve firings make little sparkles that you know aren't there, and that's the only thing you see. Then all boundaries vanish, size means nothing, everything is edgeless and undefined. Time stretches into an abyss, stops, slides sideways into parallel worlds. Then I lose conviction that dawn will ever come; why should it have to come, when time curls into a backwater and revolves in slow circles upon itself? If I hear something – a splash in the lake, a creak of branch or the cabin's boards, a footfall – the sound descends without warning, breaks the surface of my mind, and for an instant there is before and after. Then it vanishes again; I am released from sequence, from distinction; I am free. There is no line between waking and sleep and it is meaningless to ask if what happens then is, or is not, a dream.

Once – I’m quite sure of this – the doorknob turned, my scalp prickled, first with fear and then with certainty that it was Carol, and what I’m telling you is: it was. Though she came no closer, made no further sound, I was sure I felt a presence that could only have been hers. I felt she was watching me, weighing what had become of me twenty years after she last saw me in life, and I was not sure she approved. But she withheld from me any sign, whatever she thought or felt.

Less welcome visitors have come, as well; I felt the burning woman looking at me at least once, though I saw nothing. Sometimes I hear a heavy step, man heavy, that fills my heart with dread. Whatever it has come to do is not benign and it cannot be prevented.

Once in a while in the dark someone touches me, a hand slides into mine – a small hand sometimes, I think it’s yours when you were a child. So important then not to make a sound, not to move a muscle, so that the hand won’t go away. There’s no keeping it when it decides to leave; if I try to hold on, I’m holding air.

The other night – don’t ask me when, because all whens flow together here – I lay with my arms around a girl, both of us wearing all our clothes and too young to think of taking them off, loving each other without needing to go ahead and make love. She was on top of me, I could feel her hipbones pressing against mine, her small breasts against my chest, her hair tickling my nose; my legs were open as if I were the girl, taking her into me. But it was enough for us to breathe together; to lie frankly body to body, fully dressed, was as much as we could imagine. My hands, caressing her back, never went below her waist.

One night a woman joined me suddenly who must have been the first real lover I had, long ago; without warning she slid into bed with me, naked, and took me in her arms with an eagerness that I remembered, that startled me the first time and startled me more deeply now, kissing me with desire equal to mine, openly there to touch and be touched, and yet when I tried to enter her, she giggled and slid away from under me as if to tease me, out of bed as lightly and effortlessly as she had come. Three steps on the floorboards and then no more, she was gone. In life, all those years ago, she would have gone to the bathroom to do what were then mysterious female things, and come back ready to make love; but she did not return. I think I know what drove her away: she felt that my touch was not joyful as

her touch was; she knew I wanted her so much that I was afraid every moment would be the last. No longer that uncertain and astonished boy she chose for reasons of her own, who believed, once we were lovers, that this secret harmony was the natural order of things.

Another night I was not here but somewhere in the woods, and I was relieved of this body and became so tiny that I could crawl under dead leaves on the forest floor, which I did; and I am still there where no one, not even I myself in daytime, could ever find me. Another night I was the crow who pursued the other Nick, and I felt the dipping and swooping of flight as I beat my strong black wings and flew to the top of a tree. Another night I lay flat on my back all night, hands at my sides, unable to move a finger, paralyzed with my aloneness.

And all the nights are still going on. How can I explain this, or even say what I mean? Here, once nights begin, they never arrive at an end. Somehow the fact that a day comes does not mean that the night before it is over; the day does not follow the night; the days only follow each other. When light comes into the sky, there is sequence again, time resumes, but I am on to its secret: clocks lie, time is not always the same. The days are a river, that flows in only one direction; the nights are lakes, or one lake, without beginning or end.

On their shores, come morning, things wash up – unaccountable things. Love letters, photographs, a child's sock, a ring. I find them, and I have stopped asking where they came from, whose life they came from. There are no answers. No one here to answer me. No, it seems that what the others, the visitors, drop as they leave are questions, puzzles, riddles, but never answers. A woman sleeps next to me in the impenetrable darkness, and in the morning I find a toy car on the table – did we have a child in some life together? Or is there no connection at all? I know nothing about how these things work. I make journeys into the unknown, guided by something I can't see. I find things – your love letter to Jessica –

Some part of me goes along with you all the time, or it tries to. My life has two parts, the time with you and everything else. It's only really now when I'm with you. The rest of the time is only leading up to now and waiting for now. I feel like I must have known it was you

I was waiting to be with, ever since I was old enough to start liking girls. But I never could have imagined the way you really are. I never could have known how much you were going to mean to me until you came into my life. And now that you have I don't even want to try to imagine life without you. It feels like we've been together all our lives without knowing it, played together as little kids, gave each other our first kisses. We were secretly together, so if we were lonely, it was only because the waiting was taking so long. Inside we knew that one day we'd be together and everything would start fresh, and what we were secretly waiting for would finally begin. I know if I lost you now I'd lose my way in life and there would be no point to it at all. I want to kiss you till we can't feel our lips, I want to make love to you morning and night, and afternoon too if you'll let me. To me your shoulders are like wings...

Ah! It says that and more. I know I should not have read it, please pardon me for doing so, but few things have ever made me happier than to know that you love your woman that much. Nothing could be wiser.

I found your report card from the seventh grade. Which by the way is impossible, considering we were never here when you were that age. But impossible is no longer a consideration.

I found a picture of Carol, standing thigh-deep in the lake, right in front of this cabin, in a black one-piece bathing suit, laughing with her arms around a man I've never seen – certainly never seen in the mirror – and I gazed at this picture for an endless hour, waiting to recognize that man, to understand – and I couldn't stop thinking that she looked older in this picture than when she died. So then...I know she lived on, in the other life, but with the other me, so who was this interloper, clearly more than just a friend? Did her life branch yet again, and she take every path?

She must have. I say it because I must have myself. Because I found, on a different day, when that picture had somehow vanished, a note that read, "Sweetie – Had to go for one more canoe. Adam's in town calling Erica (WHY NOW????) I told him to get back by 1:00. You

& Ilana eat up everything if he doesn't. Out the door by 1:30! Seriously! Me."

You, old enough to drive to town alone, here with us – I don't even care which me it was, that's a world I never heard of before, in memory or dream.

What was Carol doing with her arms around that man, some middle-aged, thick-waisted guy who seems, in the picture, to be of all things humoring her – as if she were much more in love with him than he with her. Unthinkable...and whose was the black camisole with the spaghetti straps that I found on a shelf in the bedroom? Did your Jessica leave that here? Did she leave the crumpled empty tube of contraceptive jelly? Was it you who scratched "I love you" into the windowpane?

Surrounded by love, it seems sometimes, but it's not for me except when in the night world someone without a face comes to me; I never know when she will, or who she is, and even then it cannot quite happen that we make love; she never speaks, never stays, is never beside me when light comes into the sky. This is death, I think sometimes. Everyone else has lived on, but I died that day in the forest, and not just in the other life. Ever since then, perhaps, I have lived only in the spirit. Years of life, seasons, seeing you grow up, my time with Alicia, all happening in an illusion of the body, a self-deception of still setting foot on the earth. Perhaps I am a ghost, a soul unable to leave the physical world. Died with too much unfinished. I know now what the burning woman wanted of me and still wants; Jean was the messenger and the message, that's why it was she who burst into flames. But I have not lived up to her example, and perhaps because I have not, the burning woman will not let me go.

So I sit and write to you, Adam – or imagine that I do – and as I write I can hear a fish jump in the lake, the screech of blue jay and crow, a mosquito whining in my ear, my pencil against the paper, my foot shifting on the floorboards. I can smell the muddy boundary of the shore, and sun baking tall weeds and spruce needles. I see a blue heron pass, rowing its way through the air. And I ask myself how I know that these are anything but memories of living in the body, the furniture of the physical world that my awareness, unable to give it up, arranges in an imitation of life.

♦ ♦ ♦

June 5, '99

Today it appears to me that all along, I have had my authorial eye trained in the wrong direction, the direction of plot. Not that I believed in what I saw there: haven't I always said that fiction which is "thought up" is lame and dead on the page? I hate it when I find myself marching the characters through pre-planned formations, by means of craft. I kept cooking up version after version of Nick's life, all the time suppressing a queasy feeling that most of the plot decisions I made were far too close to arbitrary.

Well, what if I was right and that's exactly the way it had to be?

Something had to happen for there to be a book; there had to be a story for Nick to tell. But what if, once the story was in motion, the telling of it was more important than the precise events?

It's taken me almost four years to get the most basic point: what happens to him isn't the subject.

When I kept trying to solve the problem of the book by fixing the plot, I had it wrong two ways at once: because plot couldn't solve the problem, and because solving the problem wasn't the point anyway. The problem of the book is the book – its subject, its shape, its reason for being.

So, after all, there was no need for scheming about plot, no need to worry if the book would entertain in some shallowly imagined way, probably no need for whiz-bang special effects, like the collapse of Western Civ, that in the end proved to be incidental features of the background instead of the foreground I once imagined them to be. Or

say it this way: I had to do those things, but what I didn't understand was that I didn't have to succeed at any of them. I didn't have to try so hard to "get it right" when there was no right to get.

There is nothing to do but accept that writing is flying blind, that I don't know who "the reader" might be or what matters to them, that the Nagual really IS in charge here and that though I later on try to shape what it creates, I am not working with Silly Putty and cannot shape it into whatever I please; that I have nothing to rely on but the faint hope that these peculiar struggles are some kind of not-too-distorted mirror of human concerns, that I am managing to say more to others than "look at me" – nothing but the act of faith that there is yet something in common among us and that it is found by digging down and still down, below manners, below behavior, below social world, below respectability, below good sense and logic, and the further act of faith that digging down to this something is some form of good.

♦ ♦ ♦

If this is the world of my delusion, I thought today, let it be the world I want. Let Carol come canoeing up to this shore I look out at all day long, and let you walk through the door and the three of us be together. For what seemed like an hour or two I focused all my energy on assuming that these things would indeed occur, would be no more than the normal order of things. But of course you and she did not appear, and then I thought, Well naturally – they have gone on with their lives, in this life and the next – their spirits are not at my beck and call – who do I think I am, anyway? Since when does a ghost play God?

If I did die, if I am now dead, I realized today that I can't even say when it happened. When I moved over into the world of illusion. Perhaps the day Carol died...I have no memory of how I got home from the hospital that day. Could it be that I got into the car and blindly drove until I crashed?

The more I ask myself these things, the harder it is to push one thought from my mind: how would I prove to myself that I am alive, and not merely a spirit malingering here at the exit from a lifetime, unable to accept how much is lost?

I tried cutting myself, to see if I would bleed – and I did of course – but so what? Why is that different from hearing the fish jump or seeing the heron fly?

The only way to prove that I am now alive, it seems to me, would be to die; but this I am not ready to do.

Although to tell the truth I'm not always sure why.

Today I found the strangest thing of all. It is a page torn from a magazine – a slick-paper magazine with big pages, like LIFE or LOOK when I was a kid. On one side is part of a piece about a movie star's brave struggle with cancer, on the other a full-page ad for a Ford Country Squire station wagon, the thing looking about nineteen feet long, sitting majestically in the driveway of a Cape Cod style suburban home, presiding over the yard in which Dad lights the barbecue grill and Mom and the kids play badminton. All of it is scribbled over in heavy pencil strokes, some of them tearing the paper, and down at the bottom in shaky but still legible handwriting is one word: "Aaron."

The paper was crumpled into a ball when I found it; I have flattened it out on the table in front of me, and there is no doubt, it is his handwriting. I am all but certain that the car dates from several years after he died.

All I can do is accept this, say that I understand now (even though I don't) – that every life has happened, is still happening, even a life in which Aaron didn't die. Which means that in some world I didn't begin my life by killing my brother.

And what other worlds are there? I think now there may be no limit to them – one where my mother, rather than me, really did shoot Aaron – and one where my father lived past that night, to see me grow up and stay in Springfield and become someone deeply imbedded in life, with struggles and loyalty and pride and problems, but all unquestioningly grounded on the earth.

F o r A d a m

Can it be that the Creator is so profligate, so enamored of the act of creation, that the all-that-is never ceases to proliferate, world upon world, with every choice we make?

Can it be that somewhere in the infinity of worlds there lurks forgiveness?

That is more than I can know or say.

Last night I was thinking of the other Nick, with whom I traveled part of the way on the road to death. And Aaron's name on that torn page, and I thought Of course – that anonymous kid with the hunting bow, in the world of the other Nick, must have been Aaron in a different life. Following me there. Robbing the other Nick of the idyll he might have lived, as I robbed Aaron of what little he might have had, long ago. Nothing's impossible anymore, not even justice.

Even the crow – who's to say that was not Aaron's spirit, stripped of any human disguise? Returned as my unwanted guide, to drive me to the land I sent him to, where perhaps I am today.

In the darkness I spoke to him.

Have I paid the price then, Aaron? Am I finally entitled to ask you to forgive me?

But there was no reply.

Today I was sitting, as usual, at the table, looking out through the screen porch toward the lake. It's where I always sit to write this, on an old straight kitchen chair, at the wooden table I got from a flea market long ago. A solid old piece of work. The width of the boards in its top tells you it was made when there were some very large walnut trees being turned into lumber.

I was sitting there, with a piece of paper in front of me, counting how many pencils I have left, when I felt my heart pounding for no reason I could identify. Then I sensed something behind me like the presences I have felt at night. They have never come during the day. I turned; my first thought, as always, was Carol. But no one was there, no one in the room, no one in the doorway. A wave of prickling ran over my body, a cold sprinkling of fear as if death were waiting on me just outside the cabin. I kept scanning the room as if I could have missed someone standing right there in front of me. I told myself to breathe deeply, not in shallow gasps; I stood up, pushing my chair away, and turned my back on the lake, then had to look over my shoulder but nothing was out of the ordinary, the midday sun was glinting on some ripples made by the rocks just below the surface, halfway across. I turned back, toward the open door that faces the other way, toward the overgrown track that leads out to the county road.

Was someone walking up the dirt road toward the cabin, about to come into view?

I was suddenly embarrassed by the emptiness and dust of the place, by my not having prepared for someone coming, as if I had

invited a guest and yet had carelessly let that knowledge slip my mind. I felt caught in rude obliviousness; I hurried to grab the broom and start sweeping up dust and spruce needles and bits of food and dead flies, hastily knocking down a couple of cobwebs, opening the screen door to push my little pile of debris out, no not that way, that was where the visitor would come from. I snatched open the little coat closet looking for a dustpan. No luck. Overwhelming feeling of being too late. I pushed the debris into a corner, left the broom there hoping to hide the sweepings, rushed out the door; the screen door banged shut behind me, much too loud and jarring, and made me feel awkward and unseemly all over again.

No one was there. Cicadas whirred loudly in the trees.

I was facing the dirt road as if the visitor must come any moment; but nothing came. My heart stubbornly continued to race in anticipation for a while, for no reason that I could see.

But after it finally calmed down, and all was quiet inside me and out, I began to think that something was going on after all. I heard something in the far distance, beneath all the sounds of this place that I am accustomed to. Something I haven't heard since I've been here. I shouldn't even say that I heard it; but I felt certain that something was happening over the horizon.

I am still almost certain of it now. I may have to go find out what it is. There is some news, I feel, that I am supposed to know.

I spent the day yesterday constructing a raft and rowing out into the middle of the lake. I found the remains of a rowboat upside-down in some tall grass, and there were enough not-yet-rotted boards to make something I could float on. I cut three small spruces, ten-footers, chopped off their branches, and used the skinny trunks as an underpinning. Made some primitive oarlocks and rowed with boards. It didn't work very well, but I wasn't in a hurry.

I'm not sure why I wanted to go out to the middle of the lake, only that I had to do it. As if there were something I could only see from out there, something I could learn when surrounded by water and sky. As if – oddly enough – I wasn't alone enough in the cabin by myself.

I had thought it would be hard work to reach a point where the cabin was no longer visible, but I was far short of the middle of the lake when I saw that it had melted into the trees. I kept rowing, trying not to get splinters, not to blister my hands. Out into the silence. I disturbed a family of loons who took off with great fuss and effort and flew a couple of hundred yards down the lake. Then I was alone with the clouds that rose in depth beyond depth of sky. I lay on the raft, nearly in the water, wet but not caring about that, and stared up till I no longer existed, till I stopped being aware of a me-consciousness making a thin film between water and sky.

A heron flew over, ten feet above me, huge and for a moment frightening, oblivious to me, and landed with a splash not far away. I had drifted near the rocks – the same ones that make the ripples which draw my eye every day as I sit looking out over the lake. Now I could

see the whole group of boulders whose dark, rounded tops lurked just below the surface, looming presences like minds thinking in the lake. In my gut, in my chest, they set up a humming vibration of faint dread. The heron had come to fish there, it seemed, but when I sat up he flew off, his fishing spoiled.

The dark presence that was there among the rocks made me want to get away, back to my shore, back to the cabin; what I felt was not quite fear, but I knew it could become fear at any moment, and I began to row back. I started rowing without deciding to start, continued without deciding to continue. Rowing was occurring, my body was making the effort, but I was not the captain. My awareness was taken up with fighting off the dread.

A wind had come up without my noticing it, and I don't know how long it took me to realize I was not getting any farther away from the rocks. For a while I simply registered that fact without thinking about what it might imply.

Then I woke up, I guess. Something shifted. I thought ahead, saw myself blown across the lake to the other shore, where I would land with no food, no tools, no possessions except the shorts and old T-shirt I was wearing. Not even shoes. I would be unable to walk far, unable to make a fire, without shelter, without food...not good, not smart at all. I began to row faster and harder, on purpose this time, really putting my back into it, watching the rocks to see if I was moving away from them, back the way I had come. At first I thought I was making progress, but the wind became stronger and I couldn't move the raft. I kept rowing but I was getting tired, and I found myself thinking about giving in, letting myself drift. I tried to come up with a way to anchor my raft to the rocks, where I did not want to be, but they were round and smooth and I had no rope with me anyway, even if I could have tied up to them. If I couldn't do that, I would have to drift to the opposite shore and wait there as long as it took for the wind to die down, or shift to the other direction. Probably overnight. And then what if the next day's weather was the same?

That was not a chance I could take.

There was only one possibility left, and I took it. I laid down the boards I was using for oars, pulled off my T-shirt and shorts, and rolled off the raft into the water. The lake was cold only at first. I held onto the raft with one hand and looked around. No telling how far the shore was, but the rocks were nearby. I kicked the raft away from me and swam to the rocks because I had no choice, scrambled around on their underwater smoothness until I found a place where I could sit

without sliding off, but the sitting was hardly a rest. I was certain that the rocks were aware and watching me. I felt that if I did slide off them, and down into the water among them, I would never come back up. The raft without me on it didn't catch the wind; it drifted nearby, useless.

The wind was making me chilly, and I tried to keep as much of me below the surface as I could. At water level I surveyed the world. Rock, water, sky, forest. This would be an appropriate place to die, I thought. And was this the day? Had the visitor that never showed its face come to free me from myself, to give me my ticket to leave this world?

But I thought of you and it wasn't time yet.

"All right, then." I said the words aloud, was surprised to hear myself speak. What did I mean, all right?

I meant surrender. Which meant swim, and what would happen would happen. I eased myself into the water and began swimming toward the shore, doing the crawl, knowing that I couldn't keep it up long enough to get there. Momentarily, getting away from the rocks eased something in my chest.

Soon I grew tired and turned over on my back, paddling my feet enough to stay afloat between water and sky, staring up at all that air, miles deep, enough air for everything on earth to breathe, and some of it was still coming into my lungs and would keep coming as long as my mouth remained above the water that lapped at its corners and occasionally slid in. The same water formed the margins of my vision. Above me I could see the clouds flying slowly and silently, in formation, to the horizon and over it, held up by the air as the water held me up, for now, the clouds never noticing the naked man on the surface of a little Wisconsin lake, who might live through the afternoon or die in the course of it, but who in either case would not be an event. Would slip beneath the surface, if he did, with no more fanfare than a loon makes going after a fish. Or climb out on the shore and go on with his day, do what needed to be done, because he would still be living and the living still have needs.

I turned over and began to do the crawl again. So it continued – float and swim, float and swim, in a kind of trance, to the point where both were too difficult, where my limbs were too heavy to move in any position and yet they continued to move, and beyond that, until when I turned over from floating and paddling on my back, I found that I was in water shallow enough for me to stand on the muddy, weedy bottom. I barely had the strength to walk up on the shore.

When I got my feet on dry land my knees went out from under me and I had to lie down in the weeds. I couldn't take another step. I lay there with my hand over my eyes, breathing the dryness of grass, and hearing the breeze pass through the trees above me. It felt as though my body had been poured on the ground to regain its solidity, to jell into its former self, and for a long time I didn't notice the small rocks and clods under my back; when I finally felt them, and adjusted myself to a more comfortable position, that was when I knew that I still survived. I moved a couple of stones out of the way and continued to lie there, aware now that I would get up in a while, and go inside the cabin, and live as if I hadn't almost died.

Gradually, without at first noticing that I noticed them, I realized that every once in a while I heard voices from inside the cabin. Female voices. I could not pick up the words but I could hear the intonation of the two who now and then spoke to each other, one grown up and one a child: a mother and daughter going about their day.

The visitors had come back in the daytime. At last. Who else could they be but who I wanted them to be, what else would make any sense? And yet – your little sister, if she had actually existed in this life, would be a grown woman by now, twenty-one years old, and one of those voices was unmistakably that of a girl. If it was she, if it was Carol and Ilana in the cabin, I was somewhere in the past.

I strained to hear their words, but couldn't. Which past was I in? Did I even exist for them, or was this the other world after I died in the forest, in which I would terrorize them by appearing in the doorway,

returned from the dead? I remembered I was naked, and any clothes I possessed were inside the cabin – if I still had any possessions – so I could only come as an unexpected apparition if I showed myself at all. But there was no question that I would; I had not waited twenty years for this moment to let it pass me by. Here it was, the life that I had studied harder than my own, and now that the moment came I didn't know my lines. I didn't even know who they would think I was. I looked myself over, trying to gauge if I had somehow gotten younger, the right age to be the father of that girl inside. If they didn't know me...but I couldn't bear to think about that.

There was nothing to do but plunge forward into whatever life was being lived. I got to my feet unsteadily, my legs still shaky under me, and tried to brush off the grass stems and bits of dirt that clung to my back. How much less auspicious could it get than to appear in the doorway naked and dirty? I thought of taking a dip in the lake to wash myself off, but it was muddy near the shore and I was sure I'd drown if I tried to swim another stroke.

I tried to hold myself straight and pull in my all-too-obvious stomach as I came up the little path worn in the grass from the lake's margin to the screen porch. It's all right, I told myself, they expect you to be here, they take you for granted, though I had no way of knowing if that was true. I had almost reached the screen door when I dimly saw Ilana sitting inside the shadowy cabin, reading an ancient comic book that had lived there forever, and she looked up and saw me approaching. She gave me a look as if I were a misbehaving child. "Dad!" she said, reprovingly. "What happened to your *bathing* suit?"

I entered the screen porch, half-blinded by the moment, thanking God that she knew me, that my nakedness did not horrify her or violate the rules of this family that was mine and yet not mine. "It's in the lake somewhere," I said. "It came off while I was swimming. It wasn't tied tight enough, I guess."

"Dad," she said as if I was completely hopeless.

Carol appeared out of the bedroom in a bathing suit, fastening up her hair in a white elastic. "What?" she said, frowning a little. "Are you okay?"

I couldn't speak right away. It was Carol, in her mid-forties. My beloved at a place in life she had never reached, strong and still beautiful; I could see in her the Carol I had first met, my lover, my young wife, your mother, everyone she had been in my life, and in the time since then – more than ten years, to judge by Ilana – I saw that she had grown undeniable, taking her place in the world, as I had not. I

was nothing in particular and she was exactly, even triumphantly, herself.

"I'm fine," I managed. "I just lost my suit." How could she not notice I was far too old to be who she thought I was? Did I look this old even in my forties?

"Better get dressed before Carrie and Adam come back." Carrie? I thought. Who in the world is that? Must be your girlfriend, so then how old were you, sixteen? Seventeen? Making Ilana eleven or twelve...and you, when you returned, would be the Adam who grew up with both a father and a mother, a different Adam to whom I would be a different father and perhaps a better one...or perhaps there was a different father – why had I not thought of this? – a Nick-of-this-world, who was out somewhere and would return any minute, perhaps with you, Adam, and all would be plunged into confusion, perhaps horror – I imagined the happy family, implacable in its solidarity, inflicting some savage punishment on me, the interloper, the impostor, invader of the home.

"Don't forget about that corn that Arne promised us," she said, taking a Diet Coke out of the fridge.

"Oh...yeah." What about it? Was I supposed to go get it from him? Or pick it? And how could I find out without giving myself away?

Carol looked at me more closely, pursing her lips in an appraising fashion. "You look like you need a nap, hon."

"I guess I do," I said sheepishly.

"Sweetheart, you want to go for a swim?" she said to Ilana.

"In a minute," Ilana said without looking up.

"Haven't you read that Archie comic a hundred times?"

"It's *okay*, Mom," Ilana said in the voice of one whose patience is perpetually tried.

"Where are my water shoes?" Carol said. I wasn't sure if it was to me or not. "Have you seen them?"

"No, sorry," I said. At least it wasn't another thing I should be expected to know, but they would keep coming up, detail upon detail of shared life about which I knew nothing, and I would be exposed for certain before the day was out, they would know that I was here in ignorance and sentimentality, pressing my nose against the glass of their everyday life, a contemptible voyeur, to be cast out like any other pollution from this life that had no need of me...I began to feel hot with shame. It was a warm day anyhow, but I was suddenly hotter than I should have been indoors, out of the sun. I felt a wave of faintness and

thought that the exhaustion of my long swim had caught up with me again, that I might find myself on my knees in front of them, and then I saw the beginnings of the glow. The heat was coming from Carol and Ilana, or through them, and I saw an orange spark wink in and out of life on Ilana's wrist and I knew who, or what, they were. I didn't want to see them transform, see my comeuppance so thrust in my face, and I turned away but before I could take a step to leave the cabin they were in front of me again, featureless outlines orange in their shimmering heat that beat at me in waves, the orange growing paler as they became still hotter, more deadly, and I was naked and without defense. As I fell to the floor I felt them multiplying, surrounding me on all sides, white-hot, and I knew that in moments I would shrivel like an ant burning in the tiny sun thrown by a cruel magnifying glass.

When I came to myself it was dusk; I was alone in the cabin; every muscle ached, and I dragged myself to the bed and slept.

By the time I awoke this morning the sun was well up; a night had passed without my ever seeing the darkness. I made some coffee and sat down on the screen porch, and out in the lake I can still see the speck which I know to be my raft, with my clothes marooned on it. As if I left myself drifting out there, for good.

This will be my last day here. It's time for me to go home. By the time you get here and read this I should be back where you would expect me to be. I have to look for a job, if there are any for people my age. I have to continue what I will never finish, trying to learn how to love. I have to face Alicia, say what I should have said long ago, I have to take whatever she says or does then, whether it's love or hate, or even, hardest of all, if it's both. If she's still speaking to me, I have to tell her, too, the whole truth. I have to wait for you to read this and hear what you will say then. Maybe I will even have to send it to you to make sure you get it. Because I have to remember to live this particular life as directly as possible, firsthand, from day to day to day.

I'll collect my clothes and my trash, put the shutters over the windows, hide the key under the usual rock, get in the car and crawl back up the dirt road with the branches scratching the paint on each side. I'll feel the lake receding behind me, the loons and the herons, the rocks where I didn't die after all, the trees on the opposite shore where I didn't end up stranded without shoes or a pocketknife. I'll feel the cabin behind my back, lost in the trees almost at once even if I look in

the mirror, it too receding into memory or incredulity – did that really happen? The visitors gone, the cabin only in this one world, the burning woman's errand to me finally accomplished; at last she has driven me, once and for all, out of the past and into today.

So this is for you, Adam. With my love. I know I can't bring back the years when part of me was always elsewhere, a part that you probably knew was missing even if you couldn't put it in words. All I can offer you is this: I have tried to tell how it really happened, as clearly as I can. There is nothing now that you don't know about me; you know things I didn't know myself, before I began to write this. This is your father's life, which I hope to continue a while longer. Beauty persists in this falling and fallen world, and if there is not forgiveness in it as well, what else could have kept me going this long?

Even now that I'm at the very end, I find myself filled with doubt. I still wonder if it wouldn't be kinder, more conducive to your happiness, to keep all this to myself, and then I wonder if that's an excuse to avoid being judged by you. I think of how terrible it is to be lied to, and how I cannot be sure, after all, if I have managed to unlie at every step of the way. Despite all my resolve, I cannot take you there, to each moment of the past, I cannot share the experience with you no matter what words I choose, I cannot let you stand there and judge it for yourself, I cannot be anything but myself now remembering, for better or worse. Even if my memories are themselves less than true, who knows anymore the truth of those past moments, and was there ever one? Or was there always only the telling, the way my mother told the police what happened and for everyone but us, ever after, it was true?

All I can hope is that you will understand why I have told you all this, why I have to take my chances on what you'll think of me after you read it. That you will understand how much I don't want my burdens to become yours in some altered form. Maybe they never would have been, but I can't take that risk. For me, the only cure for dreaming is to dream it all the way to the end; and I hope I have done that at last, so that my secret underlife will not live on to dream you. Because you are my real hope: you, and your new life, at the beginning of a new world. It was in that hope that we named you Adam.

Prince Edward Island, July 24, '99

All along I've been thinking, unquestioningly, that surely this would end up being some kind of book that I recognize, that in the end it would look the way a novel, quote-unquote, should. But I cannot help seeing that it has turned into something else, something unexpected that I am finally beginning to understand. I was always too busy worrying over what I wanted to write, and why, to let it be; the work's own reason for being is what I never stopped to pay attention to.

Apparently it wants to be something defiantly obsolete: artisanal work for its own sake. Work done thoroughly and with care for the sake of care and effort themselves. Work done because not everyone knows how to do this particular kind of work, and there is an unmeasured but persisting value in its continuing to be done by some people here and there in the world.

What I'm doing here, it seems, is not only not for "the reader," but not even for me; it is to be done for a motive I never suspected: what baseball players call respect for the game. To be written in the way that martial artists bow before the contest begins. What are they bowing to? The art itself, the tradition, the masters who have gone before.

If I can work in this spirit, if I can preface the work each day with such a bow, perhaps the next draft could be – I won't say the final draft, because that would be lacking in the humility that such a discipline requires – but much closer than I've gotten yet. As close, perhaps, as I can come for now.