

Dear Fellow Reader:

I hesitated before deciding to include this note to you. I did not want to risk it becoming a distraction. But, after giving it a great deal of thought, I decided that some brief explanation was required, and that I needed to say something about what I have found.

Searching for something else one day, I came upon this manuscript in a cardboard box. I was unaware at first what it was, and unsure if it was really of any value. Having read it more than once now, I am still not sure. But I suppose that is for you the reader to decide for yourself, and I should not comment further on that.

Why this chapter—if it can really be called that—was left like this, to gather dust unfinished, I cannot really say, except to speculate, which I do not intend to do, at least not until I have had an opportunity to inspect what else the box contained.

Anyway, here it finally is, just as it was left. I changed nothing.

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P.S. It's best to print this out to read.

DEDICATION: For Aaron, and for Shane.

DISCLAIMER: The characters in this story are not “real” people. This story is solely a product of imagination, a creation of head and heart. It can only be as true as you decide to make it.

ALONE/TOGETHER

CHAPTER 46: OF LOVE ALONE: Part Seven: A Crooked Heart (an unfinished work)

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
'Love has no ending.
"I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,

"I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

"The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world."

But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
"O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time.

"In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.

"In headaches and in worry
Vaguely life leaks away,

And Time will have his fancy
To-morrow or to-day.

"Into many a green valley
Drifts the appalling snow;
Time breaks the threaded dances
And the diver's brilliant bow.

"O plunge your hands in water,
Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
And wonder what you've missed.

"The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

"Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
And Jill goes down on her back.

"O look, look in the mirror?
O look in your distress:
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

"O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart."

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

~ "As I Walked Out One Evening," W.H. Auden,
from Collected Poems (1991).

IX. What Roots that Clutch.

He leans crookedly against the balcony watching the rise and fall of the boats in the marina. The sun has disappeared in the distance, sinking below the horizon, leaving a scattered spill of light flickering on the water like burning gasoline. He stares longingly at what remained of the light as if urging the sun to reappear, to rise right there before him again, to retake its place

in the sky, resurrected by a simple desire for the day to be not over, and for the night to remain a little longer at bay. He sighs and shakes his head, straightens his back, rubs his neck, then coughs into his hand, turning slowly around. He has been here before. The caretaker of yet another situation he does not fully understand, or even partly. The house stands still and empty, as it has for well over a year now. Justin and Mel live in Adelaide, Australia now, struggling to hold a fragile truce together for their three children, who need peace as much as anything else, or at least something that resembles it—a facsimile of peace, which is to say, they played let's pretend we are a happy family still.

Shivering he walks inside, pulling the tall sliding glass door closed behind him. It still surprises him how heavy it is, this door designed to seem as if it is not there, to not intrude on the view, to not keep the sky and light from coming inside. Still, its weight requires that he use both hands to pull the door closed, grunting softly as he leans backward, putting his weight into it. Then the dull thud of metal hitting metal signals the door is shut, and it echoes in the vault-spaced room like the chime of a bell announcing Mass. It is a mournful noise he could not help but notice, to interpret, to assign some meaning to. He decides this time this sound is saying—*Some things go, but always leaving something undone behind. It never ends. Until it does.*

He smiles wearily at the dead plant that stands next to where the dining room table had once been. There is nothing left of it—the plant, not the table, which is of course gone. But the plant is now a thick sere stalk of prickly thorns thrust up from a pot full of dust and stones. What is left looks hardly plant-like at all; it rebukes the notion that it had once been alive. One would need to know what kind of plant it is, or once was, to imagine its previous form, as something real, to imagine it once being green, it forming flowers, it being alive, and not just a prop on an empty stage, bereft of actors, except for one, and he without a script, only watching.

“Euphorbia milii,” JC mumbles to himself, staring at the dead plant, and scratching the side of his head. “The Crown of Thorns—and *stupid fucking* symbolism that.”

He had been meaning to do drag the pot and plant outside to the street for months, to rid the house of this last bit of debris, left-behind already dead by those who had once lived here. He assumed the plant had died slowly, drying up as it listened to Justin and Mel hurl hurt accusations at each other, tending to their paired disappointments instead of plants needing water. That was how relationships died too. But, he wonders, what other tasks had been left untended to as these two had so quickly come undone, mad-struck by a random misfortune that defied explanation, but not the assignment of blame. The dialogue suggests itself easily.

—Weren't you watching him? Holding his hand? You have to watch him.

—Of course I was fucking watching him. But you know how he's always running around, not paying attention, not listening. And Connor was there too.

—Which is why you have to watch him Cameron so! Especially near traffic. It's not complicated, not even in the slightest.

—Oh, no. Not for you. No, not for you and your oh so rational self, with every little thing in place, a perfect harmony, nothing ever going wrong.

—Oh, stop. Listen to yourself. It's like you don't even understand what you're saying. Listen to yourself.

—Someone has to listen to me. You're not.

—Not when you're talking nonsense I'm not.

—And what nonsense would that be? Huh? That I can't stand you blaming me, that I hurt enough as it is without you making it out to be all my fault, what happened.

—That's not what I mean. I'm not blaming you. I'm just...

—Of course you're fucking blaming me. My god! Why don't you just say it?

—Say what? That I feel like I'm dying here from the sadness of all this? That I can't even *imagine* having the strength to get through this? For you, or Connor, or...

—Mel, don't cry. Please.

—I didn't mean to suggest...

—Suggest? As if it was that subtle. In every glance you give me, it's there—the hate in your eyes, the...

—Justin—I don't hate you...*please*.

—What then? *What?*

—I just want it like it was before. That's all.

—Well it can't be Mel. And it never will be. I've made sure of that, haven't I? Our son is crippled now, and I'm to blame. I didn't hold his hand. I didn't watch close enough. He ran into the street. A car I didn't see coming hit him. Simple facts. Simple story.

—There’s nothing simple about it. Nothing at all. It’s awful. But not simple.

—No, I guess there isn’t. But Cameron still can’t walk, still can’t run. He’s a cripple.

—Don’t say that again. Not again to me. And certainly not to him. Please.

—Fine. But what does that change? Nothing.

—Maybe. Maybe not. I don’t know.

—I don’t know either. I don’t know anything anymore.

Angry, JC grips the plant by its thick and thorny stalk. “Time for you to go,” he says, ignoring the pain the thorns cause his hands, dragging the pot and plant to the front door, which stands half-open from when he’d come in. Past the threshold he heaves the plant over the porch-rail into the front yard, surprised by its weight and his sudden strength. He watches the pot hit the hard ground, crack and splinter, spilling its dry soil, sending up dust in a plume the form of a question mark, dust he watched the wind slowly blow away.

X. Summer Surprised Us.

This is a play of memories. (Remember that.)

The first of June arrived and time passed quickly after that, with days feeling like hours, weeks feeling like days, and months feeling like weeks. Time did not matter. It was not a weight on thoughts or feelings anymore. There was no wait any longer. No one remembered April any more, any Aprils, bitter roots, cruel ironies, or any of that other droll Eliot-rag.

(You see, I was alive it seemed. That much I still seem to know. Or alive right then again, perhaps; it’s hard to say. Not only because of what had happened so far, but because of what remained to happen still. Anyway—what is alive really? The absence of death? It seemed so then, but more now too. *You’re a philosopher in the making*, he used to laugh and say. *No*, I’d reply. *I’m a philosopher being unmade. There’s a difference, you know.* And there was.)

James had moved into Ryan’s room and shared his bed, rising with him each morning to help him shower then dress. He no longer had to count his breaths for him, or labor to breathe for him. Ryan had come back. And there was joy everywhere either seemed to look. And so, not surprisingly, it became a love affair of sorts. But not how you might imagine, if you did—try to imagine, that is. The two of them standing naked in the shower, for example, water spraying on their heads, like some sort of cockeyed crazy baptism. (Are you keeping up with this?)

At times they would forget what it was that had brought them to this bracing moment, what journey had led them here, and where it led them still—like everyone of us, and you too. But at other times they would remember something, like seeing a bright and shiny object out of the corner of your eye, thunder-struck it seemed by sudden recollection—

Breath billowing
before him, huffing, tasting last night's cigarettes, smoked one after the other, greedy for diversion, giving hands something to do but sit there. The two Styrofoam cups he held, startling white, glowing almost, like about to melt, and hot. The matte-white lids, dull like the sky, and not quite secure, letting coffee leak-lap through the pin-holes in the middle, step-slopped coffee, bump-schlupped, pooling quick-cooled, tobacco-juice brown, and stale-smelling. Coffee. He smelled it pour, and heard it, a violent plop in each cup, a trail of coffee left on the counter between. Folgers, Maxwell House, Chock-Full-of-Nuts, Savarin – some banal brand he would not, did not, know.

The gravel schrunk-crunked beneath his unlaced running-shoes, the laces whip-slap forward, daring him to stumble-trip. I should have tied those, he thinks. And put on socks. It's cold for June. Real cold.

A scud of clouds scrape the hilltops, crawl-craggling over like, he thinks, like a big dog, old, slow-crawling out of bed, whimper-moaning furry dirty white and lumbering, scraggled-fur, once-white, but dirt-stained now, smudged, like dirty chalk. Distant thunder like a growl, the dog's growl, low and rumbling, phlegmatic, portentous, warning. Rain soon. Better hurry. Better hurry up.

The air is cold and has the taste of tin. He breathes in slow. Maybe snow, he thinks. Bizzare. April makes snow, but June? June snow? Rebuking the expectations of summer, like a person on their birthday to the present-giver, saying, 'Lovely thought to give me this, but I already have one.' Cruellest month for sure, if snow now, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing....what? What's the rest?

What was the rest? You must remember.

(Did you really think that you would escape your part in this? You know who you are, and why you are still with me, reading this. Me your Scheherazade, it seems. But keep in mind that each one of these words pays a debt for me, and you know it. Like Rapunzel spinning gold from straw, I am forced to face this computer every day, and try to remember what it is I am up to, and how it is that any of this still matters. There is a pain in my chest that I cannot name. But I know where it came from, and why it won't go away. Each day I ask myself—Why go on? Why continue? There is no answer though. And I know it. But do you?)

Laughs echo off the shiny cold tiles. James can see himself reflected there, when the sun is bright through the small bathroom window, and the white tiles were like mirror, glistening with moisture, each five inch square a photograph, snapshots lining the shower, a fly-eye's view of a moment in time, each glittering facet a little different, proving once again to him that what you see is not always what you get. But still, this is where his journey had led him to. And it made him think though how interesting it would be to cover a room, or even a whole house, in random snapshots, photos of places, glossy postcards like little windows looking out at a hundred different views, each a *mis-en-scene* (which, by the way, if you'll excuse me for interrupting again, is pronounced in France, meez-AHN-seen, which if heard from a different, less serious perspective might be understood to be like someone saying "missing scene" with a really bad French accent—the pun intended.)

Still, somehow the soap's lather found its way to all the right places before being sluiced down the drain, taking the accumulated dust and dirt of the day and night before with it. Or maybe more than the day and night before; also the rich accumulation of stains that we assume are there, and hope in gradients are worn away. "There is power in water," he had liked to say. "And I'm not talking John the Baptist or the Fisher King. I'm talking erosion here. The Grand Canyon might as well as started with some dinosaur stopping and taking a piss. One thing can lead to another you know."

(But here, at least, it never did—and not for his lack of trying. James never held little Ryan again, held it to his lips or kissed it—if he ever did, really. What a game it had been that he had played, or was still playing. Because, you see, when he looked back, when he defied the order not to turn around for once last glance, suddenly it became impossible to separate the imagined from the real—except maybe that's another story.)

"The butterfly effect," James said. "One butterfly flaps its wings in..."

"Nothing that mundane," Ryan interrupted, wiping soap from one eye, and spitting water through his pale lips. "Or expected."

"Is that another sore," James said. "Maybe we should have that looked at."

"Shut up and do my back instead."

After the shower each day, and when they dressed, Ryan did not need help with the buttons on his shirts, but he still smiled as he let James button each one for him, starting at the bottom, moving to the top. Gone was the need—which, to be honest, had defined him until then (not counting the coma)—to not need. Now what he felt, what he was, was want. Ryan was unencumbered desire, and he did not keep it a secret. Like a little child again, his sentences seemed to start always with the words "I want." Not only that, but the words had the power to

conjure what it was that he wanted. And it was for that that James began to resent him a little, and pull away, if only slightly.

Remember: it has been two years now since the launch of their great escape, their cross-country lark. James is nearly twenty-one and lonely. Once more, nothing is how it seems it should be, and he wonders if it ever was. He knows that loves Ryan entirely, and would die for him if that would save him somehow. But it is this cold-logic that has become a prison for him. He is living for someone else, not himself. (But he did not know this then, and perhaps this whole paragraph should have been put into parentheses, instead of just this. It is hard to say though whether parentheses keep things of importance in, or keeps less important things out.)

For Ryan, there was no real cost to wanting anymore. He had become a hunger artist. And that was good, he thought, because he seemed anymore to hunger for everything he saw, to want to touch it, hold it, to have it—more than he could even contain. And it was not because he feared he had so little time left; it was because he thought what time he had left was all the time in the world, his world. What Whitman had he invoked days ago trying to explain?

The male is not less the soul, nor more—he too is in his place;
He too is all qualities—he is action and power;
The flush of the known universe is in him;
Scorn becomes him well, and appetite and defiance becomes him well...

He was equal measure appetite and defiance now, and whole universes were being born within him, waiting to be let out, like stories waiting to be told, to be born, to become human. So, yes, these lines from Whitman had said all he wanted to say, except that James did not understand them. James thought meant Ryan wanted love and sex and everything from him alone. But he did not. Or could not. And he would never know which. (Not even now, when he needed to know most of all.)

Each morning Ryan watched the top of his damp head bob ever so slightly, and the curve of his back expand with small constricted breathes, as James stared intently at each button, worrying each one slowly into place, his concentration as intense as one would expect from a police officer defusing a bomb. In fact, had he wanted to think in metaphors, about Ryan, at the time, he might have smiled and said, “How did I fall in love with a suicide bomber?” (Now *that’s* a good question, you have to admit!)

When he was done, James would look up and smile, as if another buttoned shirt was a miracle—and maybe it was. No one had exploded.

(Hard to imagine, in any case, as much then, as now. Or as much now, as ever.)

But still, it is on this first day of June, so back then it seems, that James finds himself standing before the half-open refrigerator door reading a poem taped to the kitchen cabinet, above and to the left, causing him to tilt his head to see what it said. Behind the cabinet door he knows there are boxes of cereal, a sugar bowl with a cracked lid, and on the top shelf, stacked cans of soup. James smiles as he slowly reads the poem, and then reads it again:

BY June our brook's run out of song and speed.
Sought for much after that, it will be found
Either to have gone groping underground
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed
That shouted in the mist a month ago,
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)—
Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
Even against the way its waters went.
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—
A brook to none but who remember long.
This as it will be seen is other far
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.¹

James laughs softly and closes the refrigerator door forgetting what it was he had come to get, why he had opened the door in the first place. Indeed, he did not even think to notice this forgetting. It was as if it had been the poem he had come for. And so taking the small piece of paper the poem was written on, ripping it from where it had been affixed, leaving behind a scrap of tape still clinging to the pale maple the cabinet was made of, he shook the paper like a leaf, and hurried back to the bedroom to show it to Ryan.

“Listen to this,” said James when he got there. “Josh must have left it for me.”

“What?”

“Just listen.”

¹ “Hyla Brook,” in Mountain Interval, by Robert Frost (1874–1963).

And so Ryan did, standing in the middle of the room, like a man who can think of nowhere else to be, a smile blooming on his face as the words of the poem are sung to him, or nearly sung, the music coming from the words, and not the voice, which is clear, but not itself musical. *Strange*, Ryan thinks, listening, *how words contain music. But not all words. Just these words, right now. Orpheus, sing to me baby.*

(You remember who Orpheus is, don't you? It's the key to this you know.)

Elsewhere on an airplane crossing the Atlantic, on its way to Dublin, Aaron's eyes slowly close as he succumbs to sleep, like a body slipping into warm water, and its strange transient embrace. Barry smiles watching him, the way his lips part, and the whisper of his breathing offers an oath of sorts, a psalm to him, a hymn, a lyric and lullaby. It reminded him of what Joshua had said, said that night at the Hamburger Mary's when Aaron had announced, reaching across the table to take hold of his hand, "I'm in love Dad, with this man, my warrior man. That's what I call him, my warrior man."

"Staring at the stars," JC had said, as if distracted by a memory that tugged at his attention, tugged him away from the moment he had for a half-second before occupied. "You realize that the brightest of the planets is Mars."

Barry leaned back against the headrest and looked wide-eyed at the flight attendant who mouthed, "Is everything okay?" Yes, he nodded, smiling back at her. Perfect.

He knew how hard Aaron had worked in school, of late, and worked at holding back the artifice of working as an actor, and how grateful he had been for this chance to finally escape with him. "You'll love Ireland," he had told him over and over again. "It's stories are ancient, like the stories of your tribe are ancient."

Yes, Barry thinks, like when Blue-Jay dreamed, and he said to his elder brother: "Robin, I dreamed people sent for us; I was to cure a sick person." After some time people came in a canoe, wailing. When they had almost reached the shore they recognized the duck. She landed and said to Blue-Jay: "O, your brother-in-law is choking. I came to fetch you; you shall cure him." Blue-Jay replied: "We shall go." They made themselves ready to go. They went, and he said to his elder brother: "Robin, you must say, 'She shall give us in payment one lake and one-half of another lake.' Thus you must say when I cure her." Robin said: "All right." They landed. The duck's husband was breathing heavily. Now Blue Jay began to cure him and Robin sang: "You shall pay us both sides of one lake and one side of another lake." One of the ducks who sat at some distance sang differently: "Qoê'x, one side shall be yours, my nephews." Then Blue Jay took out the morsel which was choking the duck and made him well. He recovered. Now Robin and his brother Blue-Jay dug roots on the place which they had received in payment. They gathered two canoes full and went home. They arrived at home. They carried their roots up to

the house. They stayed there for some time. They ate all their roots. Then Blue-Jay dreamed again...

Outside the window there is a crack of distant thunder, followed by low rumbling groan. Barry leans forward and looks out the window. It is too far and away to see the shimmer of lightning that he knows lit the sky somewhere in the unseen distance. He knows what thunder means; it is the beating of the Thunderbird's wings, and the lightning the flashing of its eyes. He knows too well that it is from five stolen Thunderbird eggs, stolen by a mad hungry giantess to eat. But finicky and wasteful, she cracked and threw down the mountainside five eggs instead, each one deemed unfit for her to eat. The contents of the broken eggs became the first men of the Chinook tribe. This was the story of his origin, the story his grandfather told him, his grandfather Orland Four-Gifts. It was a long story, a story that seemed to take a whole year to tell, his seventh year, the year his mother sent him to the reservation. "I need you to know something," she said. But she never said what she wanted him to know, or asked whether he had come to know it.

He remembered how the story ended, with his grandfather's words whispered in his ear, like the warm winds he described, winds that were the Thunderbird flying in search still of her lost eggs, in tandem with the South Wind—*She will never find what she seeks, unless she sees that it is you and I, grandson. As with eggs, we carry our birth within us, our birth in a story that is not only a story, unless no longer told. You will remember this, won't you?*

"I will," Barry whispered, turning from the window to look at Aaron again, who had just then opened his eyes, and smiled at him.

"You will what?" Aaron asked, taking Barry's hand and rubbing the back of it.

"Remember," Barry said. "I will remember."

"All right," Aaron said, having learned already to give Barry space for solitary thoughts, for his musing considerations. He marveled still at that the faith he felt, the trusting love that filled him with a calm peace he had never experienced before, except perhaps as a young child, being held in his father's arms, a whispered lullaby humming his ear, along with breathes like a summer wind on his neck. He smiled remembering himself, the summer months he had spent with his Da as well, who was asleep still right then, with Toni beside him, her arm across her breasts as she slept on her left side, and Colin on his back.

They had been together two months now, calling it a second-go even-though there had not really been a first. "We should have seen we were made for each other," Colin had said, his voice curiously stripped of any accent at all, as if the truth of what he was speaking was all the music or lilt his voice required. "It was as plain as the nose on my face."

“Except that you need a mirror to see your own nose, darling,” Toni had laughed. “And you know you’ve never been one for mirrors, from all appearances that is.”

“You’ll be cleaning me up right quick, I expect.”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose. But then I’ve always loved fixer-up projects.”

“And picking up strays.”

“Well, every dog deserves a good home.”

“Even a mutt like me.”

“Even a mutt like you.”

Their repartee—justly famous—now took on a weightier tone. There was more at stake, of course. (As there always is.) But there was also a certain fatigue that had come associated with merely being clever. Not that they had surrendered to seriousness, or baser expectations. *Egads no!* Toni might have said. It was just that in each other they had found a worthy sparring partner, and something more. As Colin put it, telling Aaron this: “I guess I’ve decided that a partner in life, is what I finally needed, and not just a partner in crime.”

“Growing up you are Da,” Aaron had said, in smiling reply, which was also what JC had said to him, and Lance too, when they have come to Portland to celebrate the end of the school year, and to be re-introduced to Barry—a proper introduction, in Aaron’s words.

JC remembered this, adjusting the framed photograph of Aaron and Barry that sat on the piano upstairs, surrounded by a varied clutter of other photographs, a montage of snapshots, school portraits, and vacation photos, families and friends, together and alone. Dust blurred the piano’s shiny black skin except for a half-halo where the frame he he’d just moved had brushed a clean spot before it. He had never been one to have a housecleaner before, preferring to take care of such things himself. But more and more it seemed a good idea to him, that a little help might spare up some time for other things—what other things he did not know. Perhaps the extra time was needed to decided what things he might want extra time for. A circular proposition he knew, but one that made an odd bit of sense.

Lance was still asleep, after his long flight home of the night before. JC had crept out of bed and showered and dressed downstairs so as not to disturb him. Now he found himself wandering the house, uncertain of what to do next. The ritual of caring for James and Ryan had been disturbed by Ryan’s recovery, and their now being a tribe of two alone. This was not a bad

thing, just a different thing. And now with Lance home, there was definitely the beginnings of a return to some normality underway, relatively speaking. Still, he wondered whether ever his family would be under this roof together again. Of course, not as before. The passage of time alone made that impossible. And the couplings and re-couplings of partners, like in some only semi-structured dance, a courtly dance accompanied by ancient music with the even tempo of a clicking clock—*one, two, three, four, turn to your left, change partners, and repeat.*

The imagined sound seemed to turn for a moment into a kind of drumming, even and deep, followed (it seemed) by the clomping sound of shoes on the stairs, climbing up he knew. The sound grew toward him, prompting attention, and turning him around to stare at the doorway, waiting. Someone was coming for him—yes, he thought. And that was when James appeared smiling in the doorway, waving a piece of paper in his hand—the poem he had left taped up downstairs, in a place where he knew James would find it. JC smiled back at James, mimicking the happiness he saw on his face, a happiness both as simple and complex as a circle, and the first day of June, this time without the threat of snow.

XI. The Wind Under the Door.

There is no gentle slope to the grass they sit on, James and Stephane, and no party going on behind them. But the sky they stare out at seems no less alive with portent, no less scattered with stars, and no less vast than the sky they had looked at over seven years before. The ocean too is the same, except this time looked at from the other side, with a lighthouse beaconing in the distance. The large house behind them is a different house, but like before, James lives there.

—It seems like we have been here before, you and I.

—No, James says, simply.

—This position at least, Stephane says. —Side-by-side, looking at the water, at night, you and I, in a moment significant, perhaps in other ways, but significant.

—Yes, James says, watching Stephane take his hand and hold it.

—You have become a young man of few words, Stephane says. —Two weeks I am here, and ten words perhaps per day I hear you speak. A word here, a word there – like a man tossing bits of stale bread to a bird. A vague nod, a shrug, but that is all. You are slowly closing up, and it saddens me. What can I do?

—Nothing.

—This is what you believe, I know.

James nods and pulls his hand free from Stephane's hold on it. He does not want to be touched, and he does not want to be sitting there. Ryan is asleep, he knows, but he wants to be there with him, counting his breathes. He is becoming sick again, the summer exuberance slowly giving way, eroding, corroding, inevitably it seems, inexorably it seems.

—Your friend will die, Stephane says. —And you will be alone. Is this what you think?

Another nod, a silent sullen nod, barely perceptible. Stephane sees it only because of the intense attention he pays to James' mask of a face, all the youth drained from it. When Stephane first saw him, he was shocked and saddened by the transformation. But what was worse was that he felt somehow to blame, as if the darkness of his own soul had tainted James somehow, setting him his present path, caring for a dying man, and dying a little himself.

—You fear now that words will fail you, Stephane finally says, taking hold of James' hand again, not willing to give up the struggle for greater contact with him. —You who loved words above all, you who when you were a boy and my friend with me in France, could hardly silence yourself, the need to speak so strong in you.

—Je me souviens.

—Oui? Stephane says, and waits. But James says nothing more.

—Now you find no hope in words, Stephane says, speaking slowly, softly, carefully, like each word is the tap of a pick trying to break through the accumulated plaster on an old wall, trying to reveal the beauty of the original wood beneath. —Why speak if you cannot hope to get it right? Better to remain silent than to try to tell a story and fail in its telling.

Another nod of the head, simple and curt.

—I am very happy with Shane, Stephane says, taking a different tack. —Do you like him at all?

—Yes, James says, thinking: *What else can I say? I do like him. Shane is handsome and kind. And I'm glad you're happy, Stephane, I'm glad someone is happy.*

—I'm glad you're happy, James says, forcing himself to. —I really am.

—And you believe that I am? Stephane says, thinking: *Come now James, talk to me. Look at me and talk to me. I know that you have something to say, something important to say, that you are dying inside, as Ryan dies, but with something in you more insidious than a virus.*

—Are you? James asks, turning suddenly to face Stephane, the two-word question a burst of air from his mouth. —I want to believe you are.

Stephane regards James as on his face tears scald and start. There is an anguish there that Stephane cannot even fathom. *What did you do to deserve this*, he wonders, pulling James into his arms and holding him while he sobs. *I should never have left you in Seattle. I should have never let you stay. I could have brought you back to Lyon with me, to finish school there, and live with me. All the different things that might have happened, different than this, and this beautiful pain you feel. Yes, beautiful in a way,; and stunning, your devotion to Ryan, a devotion that I too well understand my friend, even though you are so terribly different from me. And brave, so much braver than I. Yes, you stare into the maw of it, dare the gods to take him from you. Fight to the death you would for him. So perhaps I am jealous of that, a little bit, yes. But only a little. For I have found my fate too. And it is a happy one, with Shane.*

—Je suis heureux mon ami, Stephane says, gazing at James, who now leans away from him, gazing back. —I am happy. C'est vrai.

—Je suis aussi, James says, the words as if one word. —Aussi.

—Do you wish to tell me what your heart says to you now? Stephane asks with a voice that is like a caress. James shudders hearing it. —For I would like to know how you feel my friend, where you see yourself going. You must have thought of this, yes?

Slowly, James shakes his head from side to side. He is no longer crying, but his lower lip trembles like he is about to start again. Stephane sighs and strokes the side of James' face.

—Tell me about him, James says. —Shane. You have known him a long time.

—Yes, Stephane says, happy that James is talking to him. —We have been friends for ages, he and I. It is only of late that I let myself be in love with him. He is a fine man, Shane.

—And a lucky man to have you in his life.

—It is I who feel the lucky one, Stephane says smiling. —For he was devious in waiting so long for me, waiting for me to see what was always already there: that I love him very much.

James nods and smiles weakly. Stephane fears that James is slipping into silence again, like a drowning swimmer that he almost had hold of, and then no, he has slipped from his grasp and sinks slowly into the water's inky depth, blurring, dissolving, disappearing. This has always been the challenge of James—his shifting moods, his shifting nature, evolving, changing, never

the same, except when caught momentarily in a gaze, frozen in place, as it were, like in one frame of film. But then, perhaps this description applies to anyone. Perhaps James was just less adept at consistency, at fashioning a version of himself that he could hold out to the world on a day-to-day basis, saying: This is who I am. This is my story.

—Are you happy with your film, James says, startling Stephane. —With how it turned out and all?

—Yes and no.

—That's a very Stephane-like thing to say.

—I thought so too.

—Well, if you don't want to say, I understand.

—But it is not that at all, Stephane says. —It is just that I find it difficult to put into words my feelings for this film. It is the story of my life in many ways. And how does one say that they are happy with such a thing?

—All right.

—But as a film, speaking only about that, I think that it is fine, very fine indeed.

—It must be, since it won the Palme d'Or.

—Yes. But even so, even without this recognition, I would feel the same. And I think Lance too. We are both pleased, you see, with this film we made.

—Good then, James says, managing a shy smile. —I can't wait to see it. Ryan and I will go when it comes out...if he'll see it with me, that is.

—It is difficult to see one's self in cinema, sometimes.

—I can't imagine.

—No, Stephane says, his voice barely a whisper as he watched the shadows that had by now crept past them edge further down the lawn, toward the drop-off at the edge of the yard, to join the dark blank there. Soon the two of them would go back in the house, to join the others waiting there. Dinner might be ready by then, or other plans being made, with them in mind or not. But for the moment at least, there was no threat in silence, and holding hands, alone

together, the weather had no meaning yet, blank and susurrous—it was only the wind.

XII. The Dry Grass Singing.

Two lawn-chairs in the shallow end of the pool, and Ryan and JC sitting side-by-side in them. The nylon webbing that crisscrosses the seat and back of each chair is green and blue and blurs in the shimmering aqua of the pool's water. JC holds a large glass of ice tea from which he gives Ryan the occasional sip through a straw. It is just past one in the afternoon, late in August, and the clear sun-bleached sky has hardly any color to it at all. Ryan watches as JC lets his feet rise slowly to the surface, his toes poking up out of the water, wiggling, and then disappearing again as his feet float slowly down to the bottom again, blurring, vanishing, with only the water-shimmer left, only light in the lapping harbor of the pool.

—Did I ever make you happy, JC asks, staring straight ahead. —Before when we were friends, and still young?

—I was happy being with you, Ryan says, looking at JC, and wondering what he sees in the distance that he stares at, or stares through. —If that's what you mean.

—No, JC says, shaking his head. —I mean, did I ever do anything that made you happy?

—You spent time with me, Ryan says. —Like you're spending time with me now.

—I keep trying to think of something, JC said. —Something I did, something I thought up and did, specifically in order to make you happy, or try to.

—I can think of lots of things, actually.

—Can you really? JC asks, his voice tightening, toning higher, his head jerking to the side, as if involuntary, like someone had pulled his hair hard, pulled him away from what he had been looking at before.

The expression on his face is unsettled, almost anguished. He looks at Ryan and sees him smiling. He tries to smile back, but he can't; his face feels frozen. He sets the ice-tea glass at the edge of the pool with a noisy plastic clank. The glass wobbles but does not tip over. Ryan says nothing, watching him.

—Because I can't think of a single thing, JC says. —I really can't.

—You gave me Whitman, you must remember that.

—Whitman?

—Leaves of Grass.

—Did I? JC says, puzzled. —I know that I wished I had.

—When?

—When what?

—When did you wish that?

—When I heard about you sick, JC says. —I thought of that, of Whitman, and wondered. With you not well, and all, it would be a good thing to have.

—Yes, Ryan says, watching JC's feet rise in the water. —And all.

—Was it awful being alone there, before James found you?

—No, Ryan says, touching the back of JC's hand with one finger, and tracing a small wet circle there. —I wanted to be alone. It was easier that way.

—I can understand that, JC says. —I felt that way once myself.

—When?

—Lance and I had broken up, JC says, watching Ryan's finger resting on the back of his hand, just one finger, as if he did not want to risk more. —You must have heard the story.

—Not from you.

—Well, it's not a story I like to tell, which I'm sure you can understand.

—Yes, Ryan says. —I do.

—Anyway, JC says, rubbing his forehead, as if to erase a thought. Lance was gone, and I was alone in the house, feeling awfully, and lonely. —I realized that I had to get away, so I did.

—Where did you go.

—Barcelona.

—Crazy me don't think there's no pain in Barcelona.

Ryan sings this line, humming after, and giving JC an amused exaggerated smile.

—What, JC says, suddenly laughing. What is *that*?

—Oh, Ryan says, tilting his head back a moment, and closing his eyes. —It's just a song. A song from an album James played endlessly while we were on our lark. It's by Rufus Wainwright. Do you know him?

—Yeah I do, JC says, as Ryan opens his eyes and looks back at him, smiling. —He wrote a song for the band I used to manage, Fake.

—You fake-managed a band?

—No, JC laughs. —That was the name of the band, Fake.

—Ahh, Ryan says, nodding. —I like it. Were they a hit?

—Huge, JC says. —Then boom! Ego-storm, and that was that.

—Well, at least they had their moment.

—I can't say I miss the hassles, JC says. —But it was fun for a while, something to do, something different, but not too.

—Do you think you'll ever make another album?

—I don't think so, JC says, shaking his head. —I still write songs. The voices in my head would get too loud if I didn't at least do that.

—That's funny, Ryan says, his finger back on JC's hand, then two, just resting there.

Noting his touch, JC smiles at Ryan, and gentle-nods. You seem so healthy, JC thinks, vibrant and alive. But it's the lie of spring, the bright deception that coaxes forth green buds, then scotches them with one last frost.

—So when did I give you that book, *Leaves of Grass*?

—The first of August, 1996.

—Now how do you remember that?

—You were just back from Los Angeles, Ryan says, pausing a moment, and then taking hold of JC's hand. — And about to sign your record deal.

—I bought it at the airport, that's right.

—Yeah, Ryan says. —You said you'd been reading it again, after...

—Madge had died, JC says. —My brother had called to tell me. I remember now.

—You were pretty upset.

—And you held me, JC says, his eyes blurred with tears. —So tight you did.

—Yes, Ryan gently says. —For a long time I did.

—And you let me stay at the house with you, JC says. —You gave me a place to escape from all the craziness of Lou, recording the first album, getting ready to tour.

—I fell in love with you.

—I know that now, JC says, sadly. —I wish...well, I just wish I had been a better friend, and stayed in touch. I feel bad that I didn't.

—You had your life to lead, Ryan says. —I don't begrudge you that.

—Still, I'm sorry. And can't help but wonder if things might have turned out differently.

—Don't be sorry, Ryan says, squeezing JC's hand, which he holds below the surface of the water now. —You gave me Whitman, my saving grace. So we still have that together. And this here now, me in your home, able to find some peace at last.

—You're at peace?

—Mostly yes.

JC waited for him to continue, to complete his thought, to say what seemed so obviously unsaid. But Ryan said nothing more. Then after a time, not long, JC spoke again.

—I remember reading Whitman with you once.

—More than once, Ryan laughs. —We read through that book at least twice together, and several poems, *Song of Myself*, that one a hundred times at least.

—You didn't have a television. What else were we going to do?

—Oh fuck you, Ryan laughs.

—You wish, JC said, laughing now too.

—Do you remember though? Ryan continued, smirking at JC first, then reciting.

—*Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine.*

—*My respiration and inspiration*, JC says slowly. —*The beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs.*

—See, Ryan says. —You do remember.

—Yes, JC says, answering Ryan's hand-squeeze with another. —Madge's favorite poem. And probably mine too. We used to sit on these cushions in the kids reading-area, on days when it was empty, or after the library was closed.

—She'd let you stay when things were rough at home.

—Yes. And we'd read and recite together, just the two of us, alone.

—*The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore, and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn.*

—*The sound of the belch'd words of my voice, words loos'd to the eddies of the wind; A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms.*

—You made love to me after giving me that book, Ryan says. —Do you remember that?

—Yes, JC says softly. —In the backyard, with the planes flying overhead. Was it making love though? I don't remember. I'm sorry.

—To me it was, Ryan says, looking at JC, at him staring straight ahead again, into the middle-distance, his forehead furrowed, his lips press tight together. —I can still feel it too.

—So long ago, JC says, his voicing slow and quiet, like a hypnotist. —And so much has happened since. Does it make you sad? Do you think we were meant to be together?

—Once it made me sad, Ryan says. —When it seemed like having you back in my life was the only thing that could give my life meaning. We got along so well those two months we shared that house, it was easy to idealize, to make it a paradise I had to get back to.

—And me I found my paradise somewhere else, with someone else.

—Yes, Ryan says. —But it's all right, you know. I'm happy for you. I really am.

—Still I'm sorry.

—Well, don't be, Ryan says. —We would never have survived, you and I, together. As a couple then. We wouldn't have had the patience, or the faith, not enough together. That's what makes Lance so special I think, his crazy faith, it runs so deep.

—And when he almost lost it...

—I can imagine.

—But you and I, JC says, after being silent for nearly a minute, thinking, imagining himself, wondering once more how it must have been for Lance, his journey through hell and back so different than his own. Sometimes it is not only the things we share that hold us together, but the things we don't share, the gaps in the story that you stare at and try to fill, the silences, the things that for some reason no words could be found for, because it was too difficult to see clearly, or too painful.

—You and I, JC continues. —We circled back somehow. More than once. Like a figure-eight almost.

—Or the sign for infinity.

—Yes.

—A never-ending story.

—Every story has to end sometimes. Or simply stop.

—I'd like to think that wasn't true, that our story might never end, that someone—me or

your or someone—might find a reason to want to tell it, to keep you or us alive that way.

—Strange that you would be the one to say that, JC said, putting his hand on Ryan's shoulder, and turning in his chair to do it. The water they sit in splashes and sloshes. Ryan feels the water move against his skin, and it feels like a caress, or is a caress. He smiles and JC, holding back a laugh. JC's nose is sunburned, pink and shiny, candy-colored, with freckles dotting it here and there. He wants to touch it and does.

—Honk, he says, pressing JC's nose.

JC laughs and takes Ryan's hand, turning it palm up, and softly kissing there. The dampness feels good on his too warm skin, cooling it. He feels Ryan's hand cup his chin, delivering a series of soft rubs to the side of his face. It feels good.

—I told Lance about that time you know, JC says, removing Ryan's hand from his face, feeling embarrassed at how long he had let it remain there. —That time we were together.

—In the backyard of the old house? Ryan says with a smile, noting that JC's face has pinked, his cheeks approximating the color of his nose now. He tries to recall having ever seen him blush quite like that before. Recalling, he sees JC's face in a new way. He sees a face that has aged gently, softening in unexpected ways, the skin relaxed, no longer so tensely stretched across the still high-boned cheeks. His hair is streaked with silver strands, like tinsel has been caught there. There are thin lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes, and his brow is creased where it was once smooth. Ryan appraises JC fondly, glad for the opportunity to see his friend as he really is, not glamorous at all, just a man he knows, once loved, and loves still.

—Why are you staring at me like that? JC says, laughing nervously, unsure.

—You're beautiful is all.

—Thank you, JC says, looking at his hands, watching the fingers fold and flex, rippling the water, make it flicker with light. —But I don't really worry about how I look anymore. I am who I am, and my life is what it is. I'm loved. I'm happy.

—I am too.

—I told Lance about the backyard too, JC says, looking back at Ryan, seeing that he had continued to stare at him, as if to wait for the return of his gaze. —Not at first. But eventually I told him the whole story. What I could remember, anyway.

—Well the backyard is the best part, I think, the part of the story worth remembering. I'd

hope you'd tell that part first, perhaps the next time you tell it...if you do.

—I'm not sure who I'd tell it to, really, JC says, pausing for a moment to think. —Did you ever tell Brendan about us, you and me?

—Of course I did, Ryan says frowning. —But for all the wrong reasons, and in all the wrongs ways.

—What do you mean?

—I turned it into a joke, Ryan says, his words even, but still betraying his anger. —And of course he laughed. Him and Lance. You and me. 'What a four-way that would make,' he said, meaning it I think. But I didn't care about anything other than Brendan right then, what a catch he seemed, and me who had caught him. I was back in the game. Or so I thought.

—Well, we all do stupid things, JC says, feeling sad and a little sick to his stomach. He recognized the source of this nausea; it had been with him all his life: a sickening regret. —And then we pay the price, don't we?

—If only the equation were so simple.

—And that we could balance it, JC says, looking away, staring across the grass, into the trees. —Find a way to. If only.

—Maybe it's enough that we try.

—Or even better, stop keeping track.

—Call it even, and then move on.

—Exactly, JC says, firmly nodding his head, and blinking several times, as if something was stinging his eyes. —Exactly.

Silence slipped between them again, or over them. There is no good way to describe such a moment, the cessation of dialogue that leave a heavy stillness in the air, like humidity and the smell of wilting magnolia blossoms. Ryan noticed this, staring into the distance again, trying to locate a memory, something he was aware of forgetting. He yawned silently, his head tilting slowly back, his eyes closed against the brightness, a corona of light glittering behind his eyelids, like the lingering sparkle that last after a flashbulb has gone off when your picture is taken. Into this slipped an image, one he recalled without knowing, a bathtub, a grand white-enameled cast-iron monstrosity of a tub that sits on four silvered legs, its yawning mouth open,

waiting, with water gush glurg-glurging and the bathroom filling full with sweet-lavender scented steam, and James trailing his fingers through the water, tra-la-la-ing the surface, and frothing soap-foam like that that gathers on ocean shore, or at the edge of park fountains.

And then the bathtub is full, and he is naked sitting in it. His heat-pinked toes peak from the steaming soapy water and wiggle, as James sits on the toilet, smiling, idling the time, suppressing yet another yawn, as he yawns too, the two of them together, both in the water now, holding hands, their arms swinging back and forth, making waves that lap ever more noisily. Ryan opens his eyes, startled by a voice, startled to see the bathtub replaced by a swimming pool.

—What? Ryan says, instinctively, trying to getting his bearings again.

—Do you remember making my lunch for me, the day I left?

—What day? When?

—The day I left for Germany, the last day I saw you for quite a while.

—Yes, I remember that.

—I ate those sandwiches on the plane, JC says, looking even more intently than before at Ryan, as if the meaning of his words depended on the intentness of his gaze. —And I thought of you, the day we'd spent together. I still have the string those sandwiches were tied with, and the wax paper they were wrapped in.

—You do not, Ryan says, smiling. —How could you know that?

—Because I looked, JC says. —And I found it, downstairs where I keep stuff.

—You went and looked?

—Yeah, not long after you first got here, a week or two after.

JC pauses for a moment. The sun feels warm on his neck, and he can feel rivulets of sweat forming there, flowing down his spine with a soft tickle-sting and then a merging with the pool-water, that day his and Ryan's small sea. He wonders if the sun is too hot for Ryan, with his fair skin. He thinks to ask him, but he decides not to. They'll have to go in soon anyway, so there's no reason to rush him.

—It was hard for me to sleep at first, JC says. —When you first got here. I would usually just go to the planting room and work on my flower pots.

—Which are beautiful, by the way.

—Thank you, JC says, blushing. It seems every year I more and more about my garden, and less and less about...

—What? Less and less about what?

—Oh it's nothing, JC says. My creativity has changed is all.

—I'm not sure I understand.

—Then that makes two of us, JC says, laughing. —But that's all right.

—*Perennial roots, tall leaves*, Ryan says reciting again, but this time loudly, melodramatically, with a laughing lilt to his voice. —*O the winter shall not freeze you, delicate leaves, Every year shall you bloom again—out from where you retired, you shall emerge again.*

—I don't remember that one, JC says.

—Scented Herbage of My Breast, Ryan says, smiling faintly. —It's one of James' favorites, and mine.

—So James likes Whitman too?

—Yeah. I guess you infected me, and I infected him.

—Hmm? JC says, frowning. —Not my choice of metaphors, but I get your point.

—Hey, you are not allowed to take my dying more seriously than I do. That's what I tell James too. And I mean it.

—How is James doing? JC asks. —By the way.

—I should ask you that, Ryan says. —What do you think?

—It's hard to tell. But then it always has been with him.

—Yes, Ryan says. —James gives new meaning to the word inscrutable.

—He loves you very much, JC says. —You must know that.

—Of course I do, Ryan says. —And with all my heart I love him too. Pal o’ me heart he is, he is. But I don’t think he truly feels it. It’s like there’s a wall there, like to let someone love him, touch him, would be to risk too much. Do you know what I mean?

—I do know, JC says. —Too well I know. He’s always been like that, so burdened, so tightly wound. It was only Aaron, it seemed, that could draw him out. With Aaron he managed to just be. But then, well, anyway...

—He thinks too much, and feels too little.

—And us just the reverse.

—Well, I wouldn’t go that far.

Ryan nods and says nothing more for a while, staring into the stand of trees at edge of the yard, watching the shadows there. It seems almost as if there are two figures there, boys, playing just beyond sight, hiding. He imagines them real, and wonders who they might be.

—What is that house there, Ryan says, pointing. The stone house there in the trees.

—The owner of this land before we bought it lived there, JC says. —He was kind of a hermit really, and a bit odd.

—As we all are.

—True.

—So you never tore it down.

—Seemed a shame to, JC says, shrugging. I’m not sure why exactly, except it just seems like it belongs here, that it’s a part of the place, more than us really.

—The old guy probably built the place himself. Looks a little like it.

—I’ll have to ask Lance, JC says. —I think he knows.

—Every place is a story, every house is.

—Sounds like a motto.

—Well, I've said it before, if that's what you mean.

—Do you want to go in? JC asks, preparing to stand up.

—If you're ready to sure, Ryan says, sounding disappointed. —But I'm okay, if that's what you're worried about. This has been a really good day.

—Let's stretch it out for a little while longer then.

—That would be great, Ryan said, taking JC's hand, which had wandered away for awhile, while they had been talking. But now their fingers intertwined again, beneath the water as their arms stretched downward. —Because I'm really enjoying being out here with you.

—Me too, JC says, squeezing Ryan's hand and feeling an immediate squeeze back, like an echo of his own. —Me to.

—You know what worries me the most about James? For when I'm gone?

—What?

—That he'll have it in his head that he's Achilles.

—Achilles? JC says, puzzled. —I don't get it.

—In the Trojan War, Ryan says. —Achilles was this sulking half-god warrior who refused to fight, despite Agamemnon's pleading. And so the war drug on, year after year, a senseless slaughter, an epidemic of killing, an epidemic of death.

—Like with AIDS.

—Uh-huh, Ryan says. Exactly. Millions of fallen warriors, and I just another corpse on the battlefield, but one he feels responsible for, in a fateful sense.

—So what about Achilles then? I don't really know the story very well, so I don't really get the parallel.

—Well, as year ten of the war drew near, Achilles' lover, Patroclus, decided to fight in his stead, asking and getting Achilles' permission first. Patroclus is slain though, by Hector, and his body defiled.

—Overcome with rage and guilt, Ryan continues. —Achilles plotted his revenge. With

an armor and shield forged by Hephaestus himself, Achilles wreaked havoc so awful that the war was soon won, with it war also discredited, making the way for a long peace.

—But doesn't...?

—Yes, Ryan says. —Achilles, not quite immortal enough, eventually meets his mortal fate after avenging the honor of the man he loved. He is killed by Paris, with a poisoned bow, prophesy of his death finally proving true.

—James can't possibly think...what? That he's doomed? That he's been sitting out a war that you've been fighting? That...that...what? He should be infected too?

—No, Ryan says, softly, faraway. —How could he think such a thing as that? Or think seriously about it. Besides, James is not as literal as that.

—No, he's not.

—Still, I know my death will leave him with a burden bigger than the one he bears now, a burden he'll feel forced to carry, no matter what I say to him.

—He says he'd do anything to save you.

—And I believe him.

—Me too.

—Have you asked him what he plans to do when you're...you know...

—Gone? Dead? Kaput? Passed? Croked?

—Okay, now you're being evil again.

—Sorry, Ryan says, with a gentle laugh, and another tight squeeze to JC's hand. —But, yes, yes, I've asked him about his plans for the future, about whether he'll be going back to Seattle, and all that? But all I get are blank stares and shrugs.

—That sounds like James.

—So I don't know what more to do.

—Maybe you should try writing him a letter?

—I've thought about that, Ryan says. —But if I can hardly put it into words sitting here talking to you, I can't imagine I'd have much more success staring at a blank piece of paper, or some glaring computer screen.

—Yeah, that can be hard, JC says. —Writing lyrics, I always taped them, getting some stuff to start with, before I wrote anything down. So maybe you could tape him something?

—Like Krapp's Last Tape.

—What?

—Oh, it's a play. Sort of obscure. Never mind.

—Okay, JC says. —But if I were you, I would worry less about getting it exactly right, than simply trying to get it said, something said, even if there are blanks in it, at least you'll have tried. That's the most important thing, or at least I'd like to think so.

—Maybe you're right.

—Being a perfectionist, wanting to get it all exactly right, is simply an excuse not to try. Besides, whatever you say to him, James will still have all his other memories of you. A few less than well chosen words can't undo that.

—Like I have my memories of you.

—And I of you and we of us.

—Even now and still.

—With each of us a story to tell, I guess.

—Yes, Ryan says, whispering. And there's that too.

They sit silent now, side by side, hand in hand, their fingers interlocked. Their joined hands and hanging arms are a pendulum in the water, swinging back and forth between them, creating a wave that ripples from where they sit to the other side of the pool, where it lightly laps against the polished stones embedded in the pale-blue cement there. The stones are a pale green, almost opalescent; they catch the play of the light and seem to sparkle. There are a ring of these stones around the inside edge of the pool, a bracelet encircling JC and Ryan's private harbor, one sunny hope-filled afternoon in which two friends found a place for peace between them, and then

together they moved on.

XIII. The Change of Philomel.

—You look so different, Stephen says. —I'm not sure how, but you've changed for sure.

—It's just the stuff I'm going through, James says. —I'm sorry.

—No, it's fine. Stephen puts his hand on James' knee. They are sitting in Stephen's car, in Balboa Park, there from the restaurant where they have had dinner after seeing each other for the first time in nearly a year. —I understand I guess.

Do you really, James wonders. Because, how could you really? You've never really known me. Fuck, I don't even know myself.

—How was Europe? James says, with a forced smile, and faux enthusiasm. —Did you have fun?

—Lots of fun, Stephen smiles, squeezing James' knee, and then pushing his hand up so that it rested on James' crotch. —Three weeks in Italy and Greece, a week in Turkey, two weeks in Southern France, then another week in Ibiza, one long rave it seemed, in Ibiza. I hardly remember it all, except that it was a fucking blast.

—What were their names? Do you remember any of them? All the guys you fucked?

James asks this so matter-of-factly that Stephen is startled, and left stammering for several seconds. The windows are all open and Stephen leans his head out the one on his side of the car, taking a breath, then looking back at James, who is staring straight ahead, impassively. Stephen notices that this he is no longer touching James, but he does not recall removing hand, pulling it back, but he must have. He clears his throat and puts his hand on James' knee again.

—I fucked around a little, sure, Stephen says. —But it was nothing serious. You know me. I was just for fun. I mean, it's not like I've been getting any from you.

—No.

—And I assume you been probably banging that sick dude. What's his name?

—Ryan. Ryan Gosling. And no I haven't been banging him.

—Well, anyway, Stephen shrugs. —My fucking around in Europe wasn't serious, it

wasn't making love like we used to do.

—How could it have been serious? James says, turning to face Stephen, his expression flat and impassive. —You're the least serious person I have ever met.

—What's *that* supposed to mean, Stephen says, half-angry, trying for an approximation of the hurt he realizes that he does not feel, but thinks he should. —I'm serious about a lot of things. I'm serious about you.

—Or so you say, James says. —But it's okay. I'm glad you had a good time. And I could not care less who you fuck. Fuck the world for all I care.

—I didn't think you'd want to fight seeing me again like this, Stephen says, contorting his face into an elaborate, showy pout. —I thought you'd be happy. I stopped by on my way back to Seattle just to see you.

—Oh, and visiting your parents had nothing to do with it.

—They visit me in Seattle all the time.

—All right, James says, turning to look out the window, scanning the parking lot for something to stare at, something to divert his attention from his thoughts, and this conversation with someone who he had hoped not to see, not to face yet. —Whatever then.

—It sure doesn't seem like you've been missing *me* very much, to tell you the truth..

—And you were missing me when you had your dick up some Spanish guy's ass?

—I don't know why you always have to be like this, Stephen says. —Why can't you just be happy sometimes, let things slide once in a while, and not make suck a fucking big deal out of every little thing? I mean, fuck, where does it say life has to be so serious all the time? You should learn to lighten up, that's what I think, because Jesus, James—I love you. I really do. I took you out for a nice dinner. I thought we'd go for a nice walk in the park, and then maybe go somewhere for the night, you know, and have a nice time together, just you and me, like we used to, before all this other stuff happened.

—Yes, other stuff.

—You're still my boyfriend, James, and believe it or not, I've really, really missed you. I didn't know if I would at first, not so much. But I like it so much better when you're around. You know how much I hate to be alone. I do. I hate it. And when I think about not having you

around, to talk to, laugh with, to you know, for like good, the thought of losing you gives me a big-ass sick feeling in my stomach, it really does. Sure I'm a jerk sometimes. Sure I let my fucking dick think for me sometimes – maybe lots of times. But that doesn't change the way I feel about you, about how much I love you. I mean, do you think I've ever kissed another guy? Fuck no I haven't. You're the first guy I ever let kiss me, and you're still the only guy.

—Kiss me now then, James says, that same clinical tone to his voice, chillingly so.

—James, there are *people* around. Someone will *see*.

—That's what I thought you would say.

James opens the door and is out of the car before Stephen has a chance to say another word. He watches James cross in front of the car and head across the parking lot. He is fifty feet away before Stephen gets out of the car and goes after him, jogging fast, then running to catch up. When he reaches James he grabs him hard, and spins him around. Cold dark eyes stare back at him, tearless eyes that look as if nothing could make them blink. Stephen has a point to make, and kisses him hard, pressing his mouth painfully to James' tight-pressed lips, which his tongue jabs at like a dull knife, prying and pushing his lips apart, then stabbing at his teeth. James relents, opens his mouth, and Stephen's tongue invades it. Stephen is kissing him over and over again; and speaking into the gape he had made.

—I love you, I love you, he says. —See, I said it. *Satisfied?*

As Stephen speaks these last words, he lets go of James who then pushes him away, glaring as he steps back, wiping his mouth on the back of his arm. Stephen smiles at him, a cockeyed self-satisfied grin that James has seen a hundred times before. Scratching his shoulder, Stephen pushes the sleeve of his t-shirt up, revealing a tattoo. James notices it and stares. He thought at first it was a husky, the mascot for the University of Washington. But then he saw that it was not a husky; it was a coyote, an angry snarling one, with fangs bared. He winced seeing it, winced without know clearly why.

—There, Stephen says, his hands brushing the sides of his pants, and then brushing each other. —There's your fucking kiss. Now are you going to be my boyfriend or what?

James nods mutely and lets Stephen lead him back to the car. This is followed by a silent drive out of the park, turning right up 5th Avenue to University, where the light is red. Stephen watches James out of the corner of his eye, unsure what to do. The light turns green, and the car turns right. The traffic is light and it takes only two minutes to get to Park Boulevard, pause, and then turn right again.

—I got us a room, you know.

—That's what you said.

—No I didn't, Stephen says. —It was going to be a surprise.

—Oh, I thought you'd mentioned it. Maybe I just assumed.

—You'll like this place, Stephen says, slowing the car and pulling in front of a small inn, the Balboa Park Inn, two Victorian houses joined by a courtyard. —Remember, we came here once, after the Winter Ball. Do you remember?

—Yes, James says. —I remember.

—Will you stay then? Stephen says, his voice small and afraid, suddenly vulnerable. James can hear it easily, that Stephen does not want to lose him, does not want to be alone, tonight or ever. He is that kind of man, that kind of person, bred for the pack, not a loner at all. Man is a social animal, that's what they say, but does that make me less of a man. That is what James wonders, taking Stephen's hand, gazing into his wide-open apparently guileless eyes.

—I'll take you back if you really want, Stephen says. —But I wish you'd stay with me, I really do. I love you James, and want to make love to you, all night I do...please.

—All right, James says, understanding something suddenly, something sad and true. Aaron had been right that winter night near three years ago: not wanting to lose someone is not the same thing as love, not at all. He did not love Stephen, and he never would. But that didn't matter now. The geography of his life was set not, and all that was left now was to wander upon it, like the survivor of shipwreck. —Yeah, let's go in.

—Great, Stephen says, silently licking his lips.

XIV. The Fire Sermon.

He bit into the bright green apple and felt the sting of verjuice on his tongue. He spit hard, wondering why he'd chanced even one bite. Spitting again, and wiping his mouth with the back of his arm, he watched as the two of them continued to dig.

—Deeper, but not so wide, he shouted from the upper deck where he stood watching. —It needs room to grow deep, room for the roots to take hold.

Smiling, he recalled planting the avocado tree, and how he had known that day that it

would grow and grow, burst forth with leaves and fruit, and provide someday a canopy of leaves for them to lie beneath, to make love beneath. And that was what had happened.

But what the two intended to plant was something different, something he could not imagine taking hold, growing, bearing fruit. Certainly not sweet fruit, certainly not a flower, certainly not green leaves or vines alive and twining fast to hearty stems. Inside the avocado is the stone, but a stone of an altogether different kind. It is a

[This part remains unfinished, the previous page torn across the bottom. The tear appears to have taken with it the rest of the sentence, or maybe several sentences that, despite searching, were not found. A pale green Post-it note was stuck to the page though. A photocopy of that is what follows.]

**Wait though—
it's not yet time
for the burial of
the dead. And
while the summer
nights were over,
the rest defied
prediction. Where
was old Tiresias
when you needed
him? Had he been
around, in
something more
than shade, he
might have told of
what happened
next.**

XV. The Sudden Frost.

He hated hospitals more than anything else. Remember now. This was why:

AUGUST 1, 2007

Today was good. It feels like things are finally starting to look up and the worst is over. Aaron went almost the whole day without any cramps or crying and his diarrhea finally stopped. He hates being here, which is not too hard to understand.

Mel said that he'll probably be discharged tomorrow if his blood tests come back okay. Lance has to leave the room when they draw blood because he can't stand to see it, and nearly fainted the one time he tried to watch. I hold Aaron when they do it, and try to distract him, but he knows what's going on, and he's too smart to be fooled. He doesn't cry though, and I think that's what kills me the most – him being brave like that, braver than me, and he's not even four years old.

August 2, 2007

Aaron didn't get to go home today, which made him cry for the first time in two days. It was horrible. I had to leave the room because I started crying too, and I didn't want him to see me. Lance stayed with him, and Justin took me down to the cafeteria for coffee. We talked to Dr. Roberts. He's Aaron's kidney doctor. He's a no-nonsense guy, and not really friendly but he seems to know what he's talking about. He told us that it was just a 'watch-and-wait' thing now, and that we should hope that Aaron doesn't develop something called hemolytic uremic syndrome (which I can spell only because Lance made the doctor write it down). Dr. Roberts was also worried about the low red blood cell stuff and told us that Aaron might need a transfusion. Lance came unglued when he heard that. This is so hard on him, and on me too. I just want Aaron to be okay. That's all I ask, and it's all I care about right now.

AUGUST 2, 2007

Aaron's in the pediatric intensive care unit now. There's not much privacy because the nurses are in and out constantly. Poor Aaron has his IV back in and he hates it. He keeps asking me to take it out and it just kills to keep telling him that I can't. Then he says, "But it hurts" – and it takes all I can do to not fall apart. I try to keep him distracted by reading to him, or letting him play his Gameboy, but nothing helps for long. He knows he's somewhere he doesn't want to be and you can tell it makes him sad.

Melanie's been great about explaining what's going on. Aaron's kidney doctor, Dr. Roberts, is lousy at it. He assumes you know what all the big words mean and so half the time

he might as well be talking in German or something. It's frustrating, especially for Lance, because he hates it if he doesn't understand something, and doesn't feel in control. This afternoon he yelled at one of the nurses and he wouldn't let her change the bag on Aaron's IV until she'd explained what she was doing and why. Justin is bringing Lance his laptop from home tomorrow morning so that he can look stuff up on the internet. I don't know if that will make things better or worse for him.

We're still waiting to see whether Aaron develops HUS. Melanie explained what it was, but the main thing I remember – or can't forget – is that she said "There's no therapy to halt its progress." So I pray to God he doesn't get it. It's bad enough as it is. I don't know if I can stand it being any worse.

AUGUST 3, 2007

I spent the morning calling everyone, giving them the bad news about Aaron, and asking them to pray for him. I called Lance's Mom last, because I knew I'd cry talking to her and that I'd never be able to make any more calls after that. She asked how Lance was doing, and I didn't know what to say, because I can't really tell how he's doing – or how I'm doing, for that matter. Like I said to him last night, while we were sitting with Aaron, it's just about getting through this now, because there's no time or energy for anything other than that. We just need to keep kicking our feet and hope we can make it to shore before our strength gives out.

AUGUST 4, 2007

This morning Aaron went into surgery. Seeing Aaron wheeled on that gurney, through the door into the operating room – it was the hardest thing I've ever had to watch. At least for about two hours it was, because later that afternoon was his first dialysis session. Aaron was terrified. He cried the whole time and was screaming "Daddy, *no!* Daddy, *no!* Make them stop. They're hurting me" while Lance had to hold him down to the bed. I thought I was going to die.

AUGUST 5, 2007

This afternoon, I fell asleep in one of the chairs in Aaron's room. When I woke up, Lance was sitting on the floor in front of me, leaning against my legs. He was still asleep, and was holding my legs so tight that my feet were numb. His face was on my lap too. I don't know why he'd gotten out of his chair, but I was glad he had, and was there with me when I woke up.

AUGUST 6, 2007

This is the worst. He doesn't look like Aaron anymore. Not at all. The press is all over, and I had to go downstairs to meet with hospital's communication director, who wants us to

issue a statement of some kind. I suggested that the statement say “Leave us the fuck alone,” but he didn’t think that was very funny. I finally told him that Lance’s manager would take care of it.

When I got back to Aaron’s room, and I walked up to his bed, I thought I was in the wrong place. Then I finally recognized him and I started to cry. He was swollen up like a balloon, and his skin had turned the color of butter-scotch candy. I was almost afraid to touch him because I thought, if I did, he might burst. Seeing him like this, I wondered if we would ever get Aaron back, back like he was before. I know that I’ll never be the same again. I hate this so much.

AUGUST 7, 2007

Aaron is having trouble breathing. The fluids he’s not getting rid of by peeing are putting pressure on his lungs. His fever is higher now too because – they say – he has an infection. The dialysis is easier now because, at least, Aaron just lays there. To be honest, though, I’d rather have him screaming because at least then he seemed like he was fighting it. I hope to God he hasn’t given up.

August 8, 2007

The days all run together now, and I hardly know what day of the week it is anymore. I never look at my watch anymore, because it doesn’t matter what time it is. I have no appointments to keep, or places to be, except here, by Aaron’s bed.

The nurses have been nice enough to teach me how to do certain things, like how to change the sheets on his bed without disturbing him. And I wash him now, every day, and rub lotion on his skin. The lotion smells bad, but it keeps his skin from cracking. I can change the bag on his privates too, which is there to collect urine. I do it every day, morning and at night, hoping that there will be something in it, but there never is.

It’s about 7:30 and Lance went down to the cafeteria to get something to eat. He’s lost like 10 pounds, and I’ve been bugging him to eat more. Of course, then he calls me a hypocrite, because I’ve not been eating much either. Everyone brings us food from home. Like yesterday his Mom brought fried chicken she’d made. Lance had one piece, and I had a bite, but then we gave the rest to the nurses – who loved it.

Lance should be back soon, so I guess this will do for tonight.

August 12, 2007

We’ve been here fifteen days and it seems like fifteen years. All I think about now is

losing Aaron. Last night I went into the chapel, not so much to pray, although I wanted to do that too, but just to be someplace quiet and alone. Lance and his Mom were sitting with Aaron, and told them I was going to go for a walk. I went to the chapel instead because I thought it would make me feel better. It made me feel worse. If there's really a God in this world, how could something as horrible as this be happening to Aaron? Wasn't it enough that he lost his parents? It makes no sense to me. None at all. And so now I wonder if I can ever believe in God or miracles again.

August 18, 2007

Three weeks in hell and no end in sight. Aaron is barely conscious, barely there. He doesn't say anything. His eyes hardly follow me anymore. I read to him and it's like he can't hear me. But I keep reading, his old favorites, and some new ones I bought for him. And we play music for him too. Chris bought him a little CD player with speakers that we can clip to the side of Aaron's bed. He bought him like 50 CD's too. It was really nice of him. He said he didn't know what else to do. No one knows what else to do anymore, including me. So I keep reading to him, and washing him, and rubbing lotion on him, and combing his hair, and dressing him in something different every day. Just like before.

August 23, 2007

They removed Aaron's dialysis catheter today and moved us out of the PICU. Holding his hand as they pushed his bed down the hall, I could hardly walk my legs were shaking so much. Not because I was afraid, or nervous, but because I was just so overcome by it all. It was almost as if I was afraid it wasn't happening, and that it was really just a dream. But it wasn't a dream. And now we're in a regular room, and Aaron is sitting up in bed, and he's drawing a picture for me. The picture has a big yellow sun in it. And a house. He told me it was our house. It's beautiful.

~~**Nursing Notes:** Patient aware, alert, smiling this morning. He is producing near normal amounts of urine. Pallor and swelling is mostly gone. Left subclavian and right femoral lines removed. Temperature 98.6F and breathing normal. Blood pressure elevated but near normal. Awaiting results of blood tests. Signed and authenticated, DS.~~

~~* * * * *~~

~~There was a small park near the hospital, and Lance had often gone there to walk around when the pressure and pain of Aaron's illness threatened to overwhelm him. This time he had brought JC with him, and they were sitting side by side on a bench, quietly holding hands, and watching the full moon climb into the sky. They could hear the sound of traffic on the nearby highway. It sounded like the ocean, or the rushing roar of a river. JC had kicked off his sandals and sunk his toes in the long grass growing there, enjoying its cool slightly damp feel. Neither~~

~~one said anything. They just sat there staring straight ahead, their chests not so tight anymore, and their anguish receding like a wave pulling slowly back into the sea.~~

~~August 26, 2007~~

~~It was three o'clock in the afternoon, on Sunday. Lance was sitting in the driver's seat of JC's Volvo, waiting for him to finish securing Aaron in the car safety seat. When JC was done, he climbed in next to Aaron, pulled the door closed, and locked it. Aaron was sucking on a grape Jolly Rancher stick and his lips were purple from it. He hummed as he sucked on it and bounced in his seat.~~

~~"All set," JC said, buckling his seatbelt.~~

~~"Okay," Lance said. "Let's go."~~

~~"Wave to Melanie," JC said, pointing to her through the window.~~

~~Aaron took one hand off his candy and waved at Melanie and then watched as she waved back. Looking back toward the front of the car, at Lance, Aaron pulled the candy from his mouth and said, "Where we going Daddy?"~~

~~"We're going home A," Lance said, his voice catching in his throat. "You and me and Josh are going home."~~

[Except for the following title-page, which except for the title is otherwise blank, this chapter was lost, thrown away, not written, or...? Pages torn from another book—*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67)—were found inserted after, maybe in the chapter's place? The meaning or intent of this is unclear, but here it is in any case.]

XVI. A Handful of Dust.

C H A P. X.

WHETHER *Susannah*, by taking her hand too suddenly from off the corporal's shoulder, (by the whisking about of her passions) ---- broke a little the chain of his reflections ----

Or whether the corporal began to be suspicious, he had got into the doctor's quarters, and was talking more like the chaplain than himself -----

Or whether - - - - -
Or whether ---- for in all such cases a man of invention and parts may with pleasure fill a couple of pages with suppositions ---- which of all these was the cause, let the curious physiologist, or the curious any body determine ---- 'tis certain, at least, the corporal went on thus with his harangue.

For my own part, I declare it, that out of doors, I value not death at all : -- not this .. added the corporal, snapping his fingers, -- but with an air which no one but the corporal could have given to the sentiment. -- In battle, I value death not this . . . and let him not take me cowardly, like poor *Joe Gibbins*, in scouring his gun. -- What is he ? A pull of a trigger -- a push of a bayonet an inch this way or that -- makes the difference. -- Look along the line -- to the right -- see ! *Jack's* down ! well, -- 'tis worth a regiment of horse to him. -- No -- 'tis *Dick*. Then *Jack's* no worse. -- Never mind which, -- we pass on, -- in hot pursuit the wound itself which brings him is not felt, -- the best way is to stand up to him, -- the man who flies, is in ten times more danger than the man who marches up into his jaws. -- I've look'd him, added the corporal, an hundred times in the face, -- and know what he is. -- He's no-
thing,

thing, *Obadiah*, at all in the field. -- But he's very frightful in a house, quoth *Obadiah*. ---- I never mind it myself, said *Jonathan*, upon a coach-box. -- It must, in my opinion, be most natural in bed, replied *Susannah*. -- And could I escape him by creeping into the worst calf's skin that ever was made into a knapsack, I would do it there -- said *Trim* -- but that is nature.

---- Nature is nature, said *Jonathan*. -- And that is the reason, cried *Susannah*, I so much pity my mistress. -- She will never get the better of it. -- Now I pity the captain the most of any one in the family, answered *Trim*. ---- Madam will get ease of heart in weeping, -- and the Squire in talking about it, -- but my poor master will keep it all in silence to himself. -- I shall hear him sigh in his bed for a whole month together, as he did for lieutenant *Le Fever*. An' please your Honour, do not sigh so piteously, I would say to him

as

[56]

as I laid besides him. I cannot help it, *Trim*, my master would say, ---- 'tis so melancholy an accident -- I cannot get it off my heart. -- Your honour fears not death yourself. -- I hope, *Trim*, I fear nothing, he would say, but the doing a wrong thing. ---- Well, he would add, whatever betides, I will take care of *Le Fever's* boy. -- And with that, like a quieting draught, his honour would fall asleep.

I like to hear *Trim's* stories about the captain, said *Susannah*. -- He is a kindly-hearted gentleman, said *Obadiah*, as ever lived. -- Aye, -- and as brave a one too, said the corporal, as ever stept before a platoon. -- There never was a better officer in the king's army, -- or a better man in God's world ; for he would march up to the mouth of a cannon, though he saw the lighted match at the very touch-hole, -- and yet, for all that, he has a heart as

soft

soft as a child for other people. ---- He would not hurt a chicken. ---- I would sooner, quoth *Jonathan*, drive such a gentleman for seven pounds a year -- than some for eight. -- Thank thee, *Jonathan* ! for thy twenty shillings, -- as much, *Jonathan*, said the corporal, shaking him by the hand, as if thou hadst put the money into my own pocket. ---- I would serve him to the day of my death out of love. He is a friend and a brother to me, -- and could I be sure my poor brother *Tom* was dead, -- continued the corporal, taking out his handkerchief, -- was I worth ten thousand pounds, I would leave every shilling of it to the captain. ---- *Trim* could not refrain from tears at this testamentary proof he gave of his affection to his master. ---- The whole kitchen was affected. ---- Do tell us this story of the poor lieutenant, said *Susannah*. ---- With all my heart, answered the corporal.

XVII. The Agonal Phase

~~=====
=====
What are the roots that clutch here? What branches grow out of this stony rubbish?~~

[After the crossed out chapter-title and sentences above, the following was copied by hand into the chapter manuscript on yellow legal paper.]

TAPE

(strong voice, rather pompous, clearly Krapp's at a much earlier time.) Thirty-nine today, sound as a--
(Settling himself more comfortable he knocks one of the boxes off the table, curses, switches off, sweeps boxes and ledger violently to the ground, winds tape back to the beginning, switches on, resumes posture.) Thirty-nine today, sound as a bell, apart from my old weakness, and intellectually I have niw every reason to suspect at the . . .
(hesitates) . . . crest of the wave--or thereabouts. Celebrated the awful occasion, as in recent years, quietly at the winehouse. Not a soul. Sat before the fire with closed eyes, separation the grain from the husks. jotted down a few notes, on the back on an envelope. Good to be back in my den in my old rags. Have just eaten I regret to say three bananas and only with difficulty restrained a fourth. Fatal things for a man with my condition. *(Vehemently.)* Cut 'em out! *(pause.)* The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness around me I feel less alone. *(Pause.)* In a way.

(*Pause.*) I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to . . . (*hesitates*) . . . me. (*pause.*) Krapp.

Pause

.
The grain, now what I wonder do I mean by that, I mean . . . (*hesitates*) . . . I suppose I mean those things worth having when all the dust has--when all *my* dust has settled. I close my eyes and try and imagine them.

Pause. Jrapp closes his eyes briefly.

Extraordinary silence this evening, I strain my ears and do not hear a sound. Old Miss McGlome always sings at this hour. But not tonight. Songs of her girlhood, she says. Hard to think of her as a girl. Wonderful woman, though. Connaught, I fancy. (*Pause.*) Shall I sing when I am her age, if I ever am? No. (*Pause.*) Did I sing as a boy? No. (*Pause.*) Did I ever sing? No.

Pause.

Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check in the book, but it must be at least ten or twelve years ago. At that time I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business. (*Pause.*) Not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes. Very warm. I suddenly was them again. (*Pause.*) Incomparable! (*Pause.*) Ah well . . . (*Pause.*) These old P.M.s are gruesome, but I often find them--(*Krapp switches off, broods, switches on*)--a help before embarking on a new . . . (*hesitates*) . . . retrospect. Hard to believe I was ever that young whelp. The voice! Jesus! And the aspirations! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) And the resolutions! (*Brief laugh in which Krapp joins.*) To drink less, in particular. (*Brief laugh of Krapp alone.*) Statistics. Seventeen hundred hours, out of the preceding eight thousand odd, consumed on licensed premises alone. More than 20%, say 40% of his waking life. (*Pause.*) Plans for a less . . . (*hesitates*) . . . engrossing sexual life. Last illness of his father. Flagging pursuit of happiness.

Unattainable laxation. Sneers at what he calls his youth and thanks to God that it's over. (*Pause.*) False ring there. (*Pause.*) Shadows of the opus . . . magnum. Closing with a --(*brief laugh*)--yelp to Providence. (*Prolonged laugh in which Krapp joins.*) What remains of all that misery? A girl in a shabby green coat, on a railway-station platform? No?

Pause.

When I look—

Krapp switches off, broods, looks at his watch, gets up, goes backstage into darkness. Ten seconds. pop of cork. Ten seconds. Second cork. Ten seconds. Third cork. Ten seconds. Brief burst of quavering song.

KRAPP

(sings).

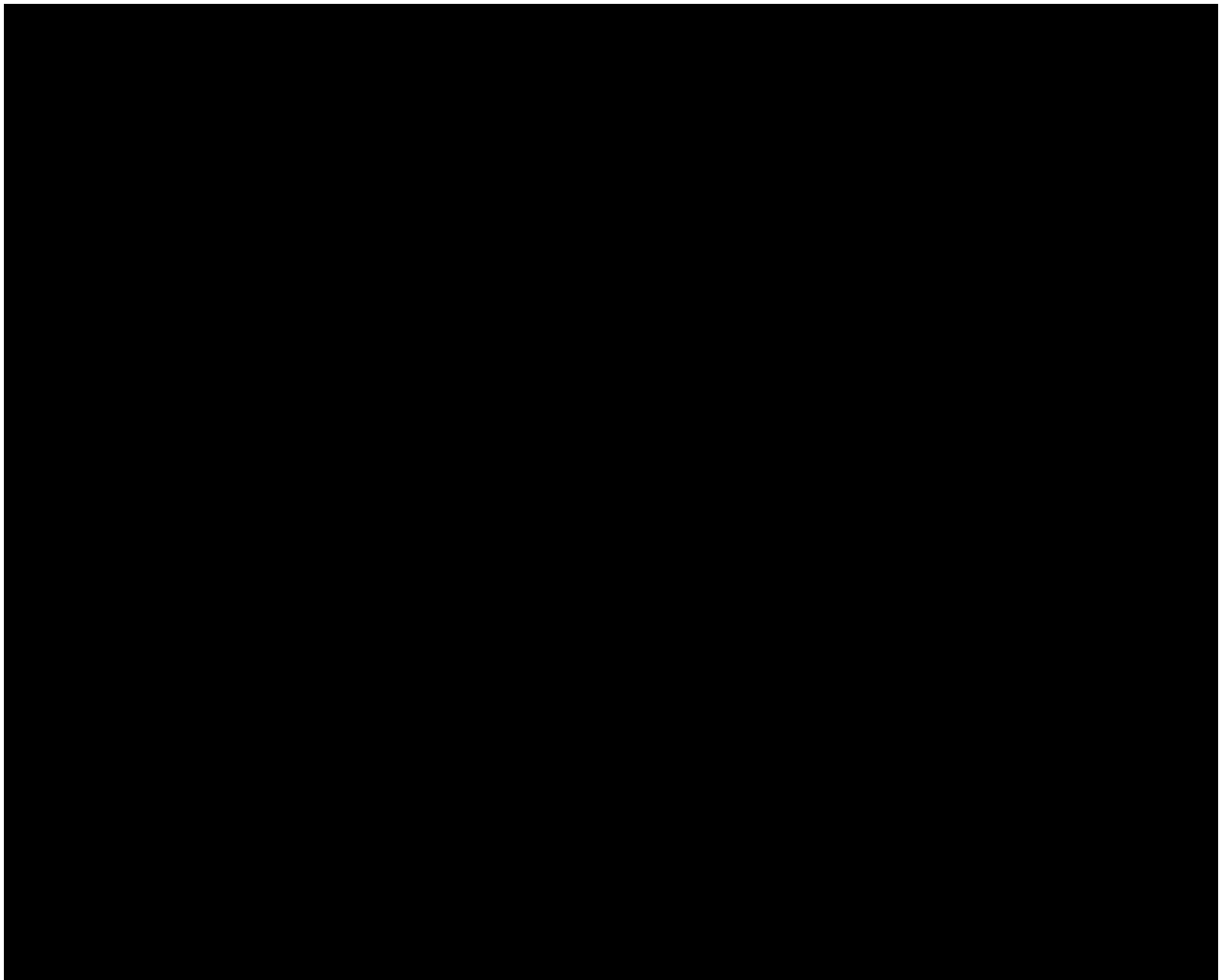
Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh-igh,
Shadows--

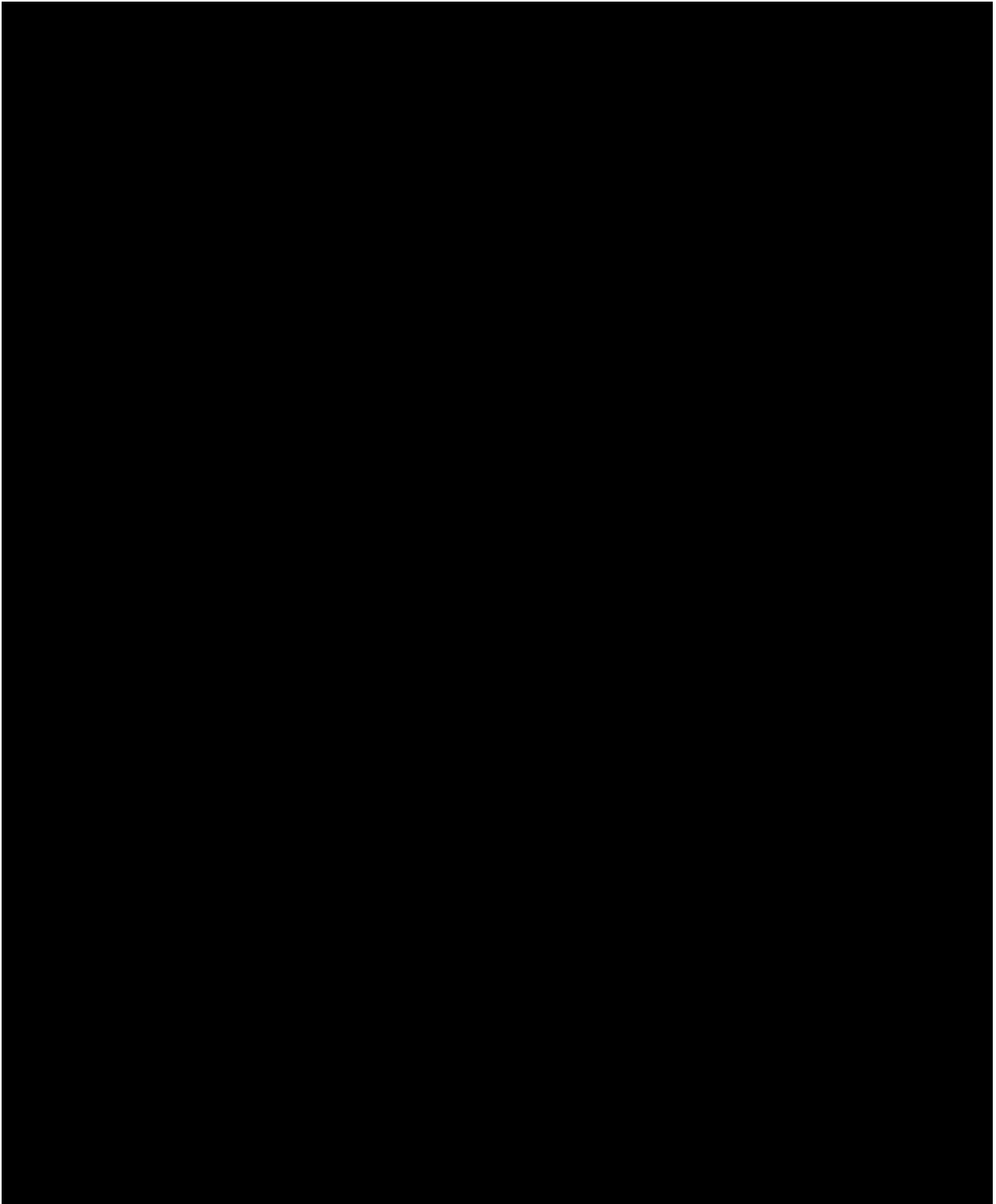
*Fit of coughing. He comes back into light, sits
down, wipes his mouth, switches on, resumes his
listening posture.*

[The rest of the preceding page, and the entire following page, were left blank.]

XVIII. Came the Carol of the Bird.

How do you describe exactly the moment when a heart breaks? The heart itself is here but a metaphor; it does not really break, not like a mirror or piece of glass. But what about the feeling denoted (or is it a state of being, heartbroken?), that feeling or being, how is that to be described? How could it be? Perhaps an image would work. Imagine a lone figure sitting alone on a shore, facing a flat leaden sea, a flat leaden sky, with a single bird, a tern or crow, in long arcing flight through this tableau. Does that depict it? Or imagine a memory rekindled, an icy night when your friend walks further and further away from you, and you are unable to follow, too fearful to try, let him go. Or is it true, or true enough, to say that the moment was as it was, and as with the death of Yorick, (“Alas, Poor YORICK!”) to present the reader with a picture of mourning like this:





Yet, even if an author were to believe such a depiction suffices, he could not help but know that what the reader wants is something more like this:

Ryan's right hand gripped by James, Ryan's left hand gripped by JC, Toni behind Ryan cushioning him, her arms around his shoulders, her hands smoothing his sweat-damped hair. The three of them stare at Ryan's dry cracked lips, listening for the last slow hiss of breath. They are perfectly still, a crooked pieta, four friends linked ineluctably by a moment too awful to endure, and too difficult to describe. But endure it they must, somehow, even if it cannot truly be described.

Ryan's eyes are open, easy, unafraid. His lips part just a little. Then his near-last breath leaks slowly out, in trembling expiration, susurrations, his little tongue lolling in the corner of his mouth like it was wont to. Together, they all look at Ryan closer now. And he looks at them, reflected in the mirror of his eyes, those beautiful eyes, so blue, so blue. James leans closer and thinks he feels a whisper wind of breath blow from Ryan's lips again—Lips that would kiss/Form prayers to broken stone. It is the beginning of speech, and the end. Desperate, James listens closely, leaning ever further forward, until his ear and the side of his face are pressed against Ryan's mouth, receiving last words like last sacrament, and with what was said to be written here by someone else:

After that, James leans back again, his lower lip quivering, tears in his eyes. Then Ryan's head tips, and for the last time he regards his friend, before deflating, before the face begins to take on an unmistakable gray-white pallor, and, in an uncanny way, appear corpse-like, even to those like James who have never before seen a dead body, looking as though his essence has left him, flat and toneless, no longer inflated by the vital spirit the Greeks called *pneuma*, the vibrant fullness gone, having already begun the process of shrinking—in hours, he will seem to be almost half himself. But for a moment still, a few seconds long moment in time, the warmth of this four-person embrace sustains them, joins them, raises them up, these four friends who found-created love together, and made sure that Ryan did not die alone, at 4:29 PM, on a Tuesday, the first of October, at home.

XIII. And the Dead Tree Gives No Shelter.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.
The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.
And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.
~ Dylan Thomas

The ammonia pours and slaps at steaming water, splashing against the side of a blue plastic bucket. The water stains a bilious yellow. The rubber gloves are the color of cotton candy, and painfully tight; they pinch the raw-red skin between his fingers. On his knees, JC plunges his right hand into the bucket. Water overflows the top of the glove and wets his arm. He grapples with the brush floating near the bottom, then yanks it out and holds it dripping five inches above the floor in front of him, brown linoleum, which he is about to scrub.

There was once a royal blue wool carpet here, when the room had still been a study, with a small adjoining den just off it, now a bathroom. It had taken just five days to gut the rooms and transform them, with contract-workers paid double-overtime to do it. Now we'll put it back the way it was before, JC thinks. But maybe not the paint, the paint is nice the way it is.

“What’s his favorite color?” Lance had asked, calling him in Seattle, one day before he was set to return home with Ryan. It had been an hour past midnight, but JC was not yet asleep. “I’ll paint it his favorite color.”

“Green,” he had answered. “He loves anything green. Grass, granny smith apples, ferns,

avocados, snap-peas, leaves.”

And so the room had been painted a lovely shade of green, even the ceiling, so as not to be white. No one wants to stare at a white ceiling when they’re not feeling well, that was what Lance had said, and he was right.

—I could not have done this without you, JC whispers, not noticing at first the shadow extending into the room, someone standing in the doorway. Then two soft knocks on the half-open door, and JC turns around, sitting on the floor, the dripping brush still in his hand.

—Hey there, says Lance, softly, like a puff of breath. —You need some help?

—No, JC says, shaking his head, his eyes confused, and blinking. —The floor was dirty, scuffed and dusty, and I just thought I should clean it, that’s all.

Lance smiles and crouches down. His hand finds JC’s chin and cups it. He leans forward and kisses JC softly, once, and then once more, allowing the last kiss to last, his lips lingering and then only slowly pulling away.

—Have I told you lately how much I love you? Lance says, asking.

—Yes, JC says, the word hardly audible. —Yes you have.

—Because it’s true.

—Yes.

—Why don’t you let me do this, Lance says, taking the sponge from JC’s hand. —I know you have dozens more calls to make.

—Have you called Brendan yet?

—This morning I did, yes.

—What did he say? JC says, standing up, grimacing as he straightened his back. —How did he sound?

—He sounded surprised, Lance says, facing JC, searching his face. —He’d heard already, but still it seemed a shock to him.

—That Ryan had died?

—Yes. And that the news hurt as much as it did.

—He sounded hurt?

—He was crying.

—My, JC says, pulling one glove off, slowly taking a deep breath and holding it. —I didn't imagine...I don't know, I just didn't imagine. Is he going to come?

—Yes, Lance says, helping JC take his other glove off. —He said he would.

—I'm still surprised that Ryan wanted him to know, to be invited.

—I'm not really, Lance says, twisting the rubber glove back and forth between his hands, and apparently not noticing that he was doing it. —Not surprised as much as impressed. Dying emboldened him I think, to let go of things he didn't need, and to reach out for what he did. To you, for example.

JC nodded, thinking he was about to cry. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. He had promised himself no tears today, almost arbitrarily. He was not one to try to keep emotion unnecessarily in check, but he was finding an increasing need for order. There was not much in the way of planning to do. There was not to be an elaborate funeral or celebration. It was to be a gathering, a re-collection of those who had known Ryan, who had played some part, large or small, in the play of life. "No eulogies," Ryan had insisted. "No prayers, no nothing." And so there would be none, none in the formal sense.

—I think I might lie down for a little bit, JC says, taking another deep breath. —I'm feeling like I have no energy, like it's all been sucked out of me. Do you know what I mean?

—I do, Lance says, touching JC's arm. —Go upstairs and I'll finish this. It'll only take me twenty minutes at most. Okay?

—Yeah okay, JC shrugs. —Thank you.

—Hey, don't mention it, Lance says. —Afterwards I'll come up and join the nap, if you don't mind?

—I don't mind, JC says, speaking slowly, as if each word hurt to produce.

Lance leans forward and kisses JC's cheek, offering with it a whispered I-love-you. JC

smiles wanly and kisses Lance back, touching his shoulder, then moving by him. Turning around, Lance watches JC walk away, watches his thin boney form make its way across the foyer toward the stairs. For the first time to him, JC looks older than his years, and frail. He has recognized mortality before in him, so it is not this that disturbs. No, it is a seeming helplessness, a timid-seeming retreat or surrender to a foe that ended up being too fierce for him. He has not been able to protect him from this; he could only watch as JC struggled, and struggles stills.

We don't choose our real battles, Lance thinks to himself, watching JC pause at the foot of the stairs, trying to summon the strength to mount them. Our battles choose us. Our only choice is whether and how we fight them, who we summon to our side, who shall be our comrades. The love he had for JC had not been born of strife or struggle, but instead forged and strengthened by it. He recalled the muddy, corpse-strewn hedge-rows he had run along making *The Ghost Road*, the stirrings of faux courage that had left him unprepared for the effects this faux war, this re-created war, would cause. Brendan had been his comrade on film then, but JC would be his comrade for life. Through pitched battles they would fight beside each other, and fight still, through death and near-death, and now death again.

~~Love and life is agony, in the original sense, struggle, anguish, a gathering, a contest for a prize, to lead, and to celebrate—all of this, defying summary, defying explanation, but the truth is still a glimmer in this one word: agony. And we all agonists, engaged in struggle, contestants vying for a prize, which is love and life, ineluctably framed by death, a full stop neither an exclamation sign nor a question mark. And after that, there is just the blank page of silence, to be filled by someone else, or left alone.~~

~~What are these word but designations of sounds and meanings, scratching against the infinity of the unanswered and the unaided? We who sing or speak or write, authors of our own most destiny, captain or our ship, adrift sometimes, and steering others, back and forth, with the wind and against it, trying to decide what progress is, looks like, could be, struggling on, always struggling on, until one day we don't, and we are dead, leaving the struggle to others.~~

~~But this is not what Lance was thinking at that moment, not really. These are incurvive thoughts, unfaithful to the narrative. Fuck.~~

XIX. Passing, I Leave Thee.

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience.
~ T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land (1922)

No one could remember ever seeing a dress as red as that before. And no one would ever forget it either. Endless ever-changing stories would be told of how on that day Toni wore the dress like a flag she was flying, leading a corps of troops into battle, as if single-handedly setting out to banish from the day any shade of gray or black, any color not bursting bright and vibrant, any color not completely, fully, utterly alive. Her full-throated laugh as she greeted guests gush from her like water pouring from a pitcher. She held hands and hugged and brushed tears from cheeks, never not smiling. James watched her in awe, frozen still in grief, standing at the edge of the growing crowd, scratching his scalp self-shorn of hair in mourning, the slow darkening dusk behind him.

Naked, crying, scissors still in hand, that morning Lance had found James, held him. “Sit down,” Lance had said, “here on the toilet.” James had said nothing in response, but did what he was told to do, sitting down slowly, the cold porcelain seat a shock to his skin. “Give me the scissors James,” Lance had said, resting them from unwilling fingers. “You’ll hurt yourself. You don’t want to hurt yourself. Not today.” But of course he had wanted to hurt himself, to scratch at the inside of his wrists until they bled and bled. He had wanted to feel something, even pain, instead of feeling just numb. He had thought to try to explain this but stayed silent instead. Now he stood where he stood, wondering how he had got there, and what time it was, whether the whole thing was just a memory, whether he was really alive.

—Am I alive, he whispered, wondering what time it was, feeling outside of history, like somehow he had stepped outside of narrative, what was planned for him. The sense of loneliness and loss was overwhelming. He could turn and run, escape into the woods, and no one would be the wiser, no one would notice he was gone—except they would. He knew they would. And come find him, pulling him back into the story of their own lives, making him part of the memory of this day. But he didn’t want to be a memory. He wanted to be happy, and alive, just like what everyone else wanted.

There beyond the swimming pool were people James could not see. But their voices carried overhead. Every voice did. Skeins of conversations tangled, braided, forming knots and clusters, twisting into yarns and half-tales, script-shreds, diced dialogue, scattered words like confetti cut or torn from discarded books, paper-tatters thrown upward and then filtering back to the ground, soft murmurs descending unbidden, half-heard here and there, overheard talk-snippets, ease-dropped whisper-bits, inadvertent listens and surveilled chit-chattering.

—He looks good for his age. *No, the white wine is too cold.* I suppose they should be admired, but it's such a weird story, don't you think? *Weird to sleep in my old room again.* No, I can get it sweetie. *She said it's vintage, something she found in Paris.* What would you say, is he sixty? *They were old friends once, although I'm not sure how close.* It's a narcissus—beautiful blooms, don't you think? *Cremated, yeah.* Are you sure you won't eat something? *Do you think they still do it? I know you must know.* I never really knew Ryan very well. *Pretty near I suspect.* It's beautiful this time of year in Barcelona. *Still he hasn't lost his looks.* Pardon—je ne parle pas francais. *I can't imagine doing what JC did, taking someone dying like that into your home.* No, he hasn't. *Did you hear what happened to Alex and their children?* I loved him so, I really did. The sex was blazing hot. *Well, I'm happy to be here. Thank you for calling me.* I heard he turned down twenty-five million dollars to the Episode Eight. *How you right holding up there pal?* Probably just a phase he's going through. *My dad planted it.* In Melbourne I think, the whole family. *Man, who is that he's with? That's no fashion model, that's for sure.* You always know what to say Ang. *Did you give it to him yet?* The shiraz is fine, better than I expected for an Australian wine. *Uncut, and really thick.* You're dad showed me some of your baby-pictures. *There's really no excuse for it.* And thank you so much for the flowers. *No, but I heard she is suing him for back child-support.* I worry that he might try to hurt himself. *And then I thought I might die. God, it was like a second chance.* Well, surely I wanted to do something in his honor, something that means something, like his being in my film when so sick. *I feel like I've really wasted so much time, so much time.* Did you see? Toni is engaged. *What an odd collection of people.* Merci Shane, merci. *Come here, I'll introduce you.* For one thing, he loved books—fuck, he loved books. *Never really lived up to his potential, not as an actor he didn't.* Problem is I should have taken it with him. *Fat chance she'll get anything out of him.* It's just so sad. *It will be twenty-six years in March.* I heard they were lovers once. *Or what's left of it.* I'd still feckin' kill em. *We knew this day would come. And in a way it seemed not to come quite as fast as we had feared.* You should have seen the grip he had on those scissors. His fingers were blue. *Is that Eric? I think it is. I wonder how he's doing.* He seemed odd to me. Always so stand-offish. Maybe he had other things on his mind. *Thank you Stephane, thank you for noticing.* But then it might be me there with my hair all cut off. *Aaron is as handsome as ever. Who thought he'd end up with a guy?* When he got better there for a while it seemed like such a blessing. *Brendan, I doubt that very seriously.* You have always been there for me. *You'd never know what brought him here, well... I feel like I've really wasted so much time, so much time.* He's just so depressed. *There used to be a fence there.* Is there going to be a eulogy? You mean, like dying? *People can be bastards.* There was a time I thought we might get back together. *I keep thinking of the burial canoe.* They really do seem happy together. *How could she have not known he was gay?* It really is so sad, I mean, why with him? *But then, or now, I suppose, it feels like a curse.* I'm trying to decide if he's a martyr or a saint? *Yes, medical school, that's what he said.* Wait, wait—I think it's happening.

The cello keens. A vespertine mist creeps in from the sea. The paling skies befit a eulogy. Those there stop still to listen, stop still to watch. There, is a tree swinging. And voices are in the

wind's singing, more distant and more solemn than a fading star. A line of slight-stooped lonely—seeming figures slow-trudge to a place cleared of crowd, before a still unbudded tree, its few leaves a-quaver, its thin-branched skeleton adumbrating what this tree might become. In a line, they have decided to read the poem together, from beginning to end, each one reciting strong-voiced a stanza, then passing it on baton-wise to the person hand-held next. There were twenty there to do it, twenty facing those there to remember Ryan's life listening, twenty damp-eyed loose-limbed weak-kneed heart-pained stiff-standing dry-throated celebrants song-saying the music-words of the poems for him, for Ryan.

Toni went first, beginning too soft to hear, then starting over. The wind picked up her voice, or so it seemed, supporting each worried, carrying it just so, each word like a bird taking flight, soaring thus so:

WHEN lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd—and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

O ever-returning spring! trinity sure to me you bring;
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love.

Colin beside her trembled, staring at the card he held, the words it contained, the next stanza for him to say-sing, thinking of love and death and marriage, beside himself with joy and love, worried so about his sweet new love, hoping that grief might not put a taint on it, for Toni had loved Ryan so, and so he did through her as well, and through himself as well. He paused in thought and cleared his throat and loud-said:

O powerful, western, fallen star!
O shades of night! O moody, tearful night!
O great star disappear'd! O the black murk that hides the star!
O cruel hands that hold me powerless! O helpless soul of me!
O harsh surrounding cloud, that will not free my soul!

Barry stood beside Aaron holding his hand, feeling it tremble, some might say like a leaf, but that would not describe it. They listened together. The poem-words ascending and descending, each verse-line a parabola, reversed over-joined an ellipse. Aaron looks at Barry who knowing looks up at him. Their eyes question each other, but answer too.

—Will I ever be tested so, Aaron asks as much as wonders. —As much as James by this?

—I do not know, Barry whispers. —But you will not be alone.

Nine people have read when JC steps forward. He does not need a card to read from; he knows the verse by heart

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what shall my perfume be, for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds, blown from east and west,
Blown from the eastern sea, and blown from the western sea, till there on the
prairies meeting:
These, and with these, and the breath of my chant,
I perfume the grave of him I love.

After Lance reads, James was last, as intended. His eyes are swollen, and his face is wet with tears. He had found Aaron in the crowd, and stares at him. You are my audience, he thinks, you who knew me before I was so broken, who always loved me, before my head was filled with straw, before you let me leave when I should have stayed. Ryan told me that it was a decision that had to be made, that there was no such thing as two people meant to be together. But he was wrong. And now I remain alone, and feel like I can't go on.

Sighing deeply, James concludes the poem, reciting as if it would be the last time he ever read a poem again, each word dusty and unpleasant, as if each word were a stone.

Yet each I keep, and all, retrievements out of the night;
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star, with the countenance full of woe,
With the lilac tall, and its blossoms of mastering odor;
With the holders holding my hand, nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine, and I in the midst, and their memory ever I keep—for the dead I
loved...

James coughs, crying, his knees buckle beneath him. He falls with a thud to his knees, one hand outstretched, slapping the grass. JC stoops beside him, trying to help him up. Then Aaron is there too, lifting James gently to his feet again, whispering in his ear, —for the dead I loved so well. James stares at Aaron, his vision blurred, his eyes darting, confused. Then he turns and faces the gathered crowd again, to finish the poem, Aaron still holding his arm, whisper-feeding the words to James as he loudly repeats them.

Comrades mine, and I in the midst, and their memory ever I keep—for the dead I

loved so well.

For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands...and this for his dear sake;
Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines, and the cedars dusk and dim.

When the poem concludes, nothing but silence remains. JC and Aaron help James to a place to sit down, not a chair, but a wood and stone bench near the bottom of the yard. There the three of them stare out at the sky, barely noticing the sea below. Soon they are joined by others who wait quietly with them, the only sound now the wind's singing. People watching wonder what they wait for, or seem to wait for, what this gathering means. The people waiting wonder too, until Aaron knowing tells them.

—There it is, he says, pointing with the hand that James does not hold. —Orion.

XX. When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd.

Through the cramped off-square window, lodged crooked in the wall just above the desk, he could see the lilac-tree near to bloom. Three long days and nights he had been here now, still fearful of his decision to leave the hospital and come here. His laptop open, the screen glowing a phosphorous green. Not one word yet written; but soon enough the words would come, he thinks, words like bricks, not to build a wall, but to tear one down. This was his last chance, and he had to take it. He had been left no choice because

[And this is where it ended.]
