

Dies: A Sentence

Vanessa Place

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with an Introduction by Susan McCabe

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for Carolyn K. Place

Introduction

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

–Gracie Allen

“Sentences make one sigh.”

–Gertrude Stein

Dies withholds the period. Suspends us over a precipice, pulls us into the *center of a great labyrinth* (106). Vanessa Place’s sentence, the length of her tour de force novella, is not a sigh, but a concentrated breath, an exhalation, buoyed upon the *airy cushion of a poet’s comma* (62). Stein has schematized: “a sentence is not emotional a paragraph is.” Yet like Stein’s project to reinvent all aspects of predication, Place breaks the limit of the sentence, making the form the sentient expression of an elaborate *subjective correlative* (77). This revision of Eliot’s famous phrase is only one example of how Place inserts herself in literary tradition and reconstructs it inside and out. The preliminary reference or correlative for this text is World War I—including the poignant traditions of war literature Place draws upon. I am not suggesting that *Dies* merely constellates allusions; its urgent hysterical speaker compels us to think this sentence as intensely emotional, confronting as it does annihilation, *walking carefully through the rubble and around the landmines* (3), hyper-alert for every sound and movement, its syntax a mechanism of vigilant horror and dread, sentiment and irony. *Dies* circuits the high and the low, taking on the apocryphal tone of the postwar fable: *we are the noble cockroach, brown-shelled priests* (124). Place’s avant-gardism is *avant terror*, and thus this text cannot be reduced to its dazzling linguistic pyrotechnics and flares, its puns, refurbished clichés, syntactic inversions, stupendous catalogues bursting the seams, its gallows humor, its grotesqueries, its philosophical and spiritual quandaries; nevertheless the plot of the sentence is the twin of its form so that, as Pam Ore has said about *Dies*, it is “one long bloody trench.”¹ The writing, indeed, folds and furrows, winds and implodes, scissions and closes. The soldiers, sentenced, parade to the front, in circuitous march, recollected as a matter of both chance and inevitability:

I remember on the boat over, before that, when I woke this morning, there, I left for the train to catch the boat to bring me to the trucks to cart me to where I began walking, before that, well, recall with a woodcut’s grave precision that before I woke the morning I left for the train to catch the boat to bring me to the trucks, etcetera, I was walking with some purpose and great determination, there, it was light in that thin brown way one reads about in liberal magazine clouds appended overhead and sun smeared everywhere, there, the road I was on was tactically reasonably pebbled (17-18)

It is difficult to quote from *Dies* because its writing is so hinged and stitched, one unit dependent

upon the next one, like the traversal over large landscapes to come to the western front, which, as war historians have observed, moved but minimally forward and backward, an epitome of traumatic immobility. Here in this snippet we have of deictic pointing *there* within a indeterminate map without center (the center is everywhere and nowhere in this rhizomatic structure); *there* is etched and magazined and *tactile*; walking, or rather marching, becomes memory, recursive and blotted, on tenuously solid. There is *no turning back* from the unit's march into the *maw* of destruction, *machine guns on both sides, cut into quarters therefore, the boy in front of me died with a sigh, his head fell to one side* (26), with *parts and bodies all, dying* (129). The long shot of the sentence sighs and funnels us into an early close up of the dying comrade's body, pivot of the text's dissociating, felt sentiment:

his head fell to one side and his cheek rested on another man's shoulder, and the other man, used to comforting his own children, put his arm around the lad and kissed the top of his head, then he said, there, and he died, and one man dragged himself from the circle, blood was coursing down his legs and the bones of his hips were showing, an awful sheer white unpeeled from shank of purple meat, still he inched himself along, quiet, towards us, trying to get back, his fingers dug at the dirt while his feet squirmed like fish at the bottom of a boat, he got close, I could see it in his eyes, he looked right at me, Johnny, right at me with a look I'll never forget, a look that was the full measure of the man (26-27)

What is the incommensurable measure, the *dustbin quintessence* (16) of *Dies*? It lies in such powerful dissections of embodied trauma as well as in its attempt to *find that perfect combination of the mythic and the contemporary* (12). The speaker, waxing and waning, at times resembles Djuna Barnes's Irish quack, Dr. Mathew O'Connor, whose interrogation of the night (and the perversions of cloaks and reveals), stuns his audience with brooding flight and baseness, with his mythic contemporaneous register.

We are indeed unmoored from time as we conventionally think we know it. This time sense depends upon the spatial mechanics of Place's commas; rather than the end-stop, she prefers the rocking caesura, the likes of Ezra Pound's "Seafarer" poet, who in his rendition of Middle English, presents the bitter-sweet exile faring unevenly and alliteratively on an oral adventure; in this text's like tone *it was bitter cold and worse warm* (53); there is a *babe in the basket and one on the bone* (54). Indeed the architectonics of *Dies* calls upon the aural touchstones, not only of Pound, but of Dante, Rabelais (beware of a scatological extravaganza), Eliot, Whitman, Stein, the Bible, Beckett, Joyce, Remarque, even *the ghost of mark twain* (105)—a babbling horde that makes this sentence both humbling and beyond paraphrase, both mythic and contemporary.

The logic of Place's grammar is not outside of time though it feels as though it is out of time, gripping the *sun-shorn present*, the *untamed cadence of ten thousand feet* (121), for *there's nothing to do but keep breathing* (24), in *right left right left* (24) lockstep, nothing but the necessity of movement forward: *we would have wept but we had to keep breathing, so we beggared our breath and snuck sips of sorrow on the side* (25). Language detours even as it forges a limited future ten *(traversing from this to our next this* [54]), or perhaps, creates what the text calls the *ablative subliminal* (118). (We might consider this a term of Latin grammar as much as a philosophical trope of evaporation.) Yet, as already intimated, the future lies curled in the already dissipated, where it is impossible to *rest on having been, compossibly affixed like a cancelled stamp* (90). In effect, *Dies* struggles to attain a present (*if we could have a moment longer* [56]), which refuses to materialize. The counterpoint to the forward march of the text (if you stop you are dead) then is the knowledge (formally realized) that time is curved, folded, not linear: *you have to start somewhere, and often it ends at the end* (104).

Let me step back a moment. *Dies* takes on the largest of questions about time (much like Place modernist predecessors). To put it most reductively, the text revolves around the skewed relationships between the contingent and the eternal, or rather the abyss that divides them in the very moment of death. Or put another way: what does it mean to be alive, and how do we know we are alive at all? Whose narratives, of course, put such questions in stark relief (a bit more on this later). I return for now to the problem of movement and stasis. The rush of life (and breath) is antithetical to a mourner's desire to stand still. This sentence stretches between these dual forces. Grimly jocund, the speaker babbles onward, pressing ahead, in the midst of his dying and dead comrades. He simply cannot reconcile the fact that one can have been alive one moment and then dead the next (*for how can one have been alive and then not have been* 128). In part, the deferral of mourning, the delay of cognition and the denial of finality fuels this protracted sentence. The plot, or narrative trajectory of *Dies*, emerges in the first fifth of the whole as if in miniature. Throughout we learn of the stratagems surrounding the *donjon*—taking it, being taken by it, and then departing from it. Near the beginning

we approached the donjon with renewed purpose [...] the tall unsightly tower and then I woke but briefly, I woke and wondered where I was and why, there were cockle shells under my shirt and the smell of baked walnuts tangled in my hair, I woke and wondered what had become of my friends and how were my enemies, I wept for such wondering (25)

In the midst of this weeping and wondering, waking and sleeping, the speaker has his *first wound* (27) the boy beside him sighing and dying, the boy looking at him piercingly and him *still standing* (27). The rest of *Dies* elongates this premiere wounding until we are seeing it both differently, and as the same (another way of calling the text uncanny). We've been here before, so much so that there is *no proof our resurrections weren't mere reruns* (115). Place strays from a starting-point until the very principles of language as an ordering system break down. Let me briefly anatomize this breakdown. There are several ways (at least) that the text moves forward while it does not, or rather it moves both horizontally (as plots do) and vertically (there is a long sequence of spiraling downward—*I was demobbed, falling* [111]):

1) First, its structure can be visualized as a Chinese box, read as serried stories; in other words one story transfers to another, or is within another, until the primary one is lost (some brilliant examples of this are the story of *one Simon Fitzgerald [...] who dared the vast gray gulf lease in antique patience* [41], of the poet who became a lawyer, of *Freiburger who'd had the luck landing sideways and so was not immediately shot on the spot* [23], who goes home and turns blind and who probably reappears much later). One of my favorite divagations is the story of the *Committee for the erection of monumentals* (12) and one of my favorite tactics of *Dies* is its multiple cast of characters so that Emily Otis is also on the committee and she *insisted on nettle beauty* (14). The monument diversion serves the anti-monumental confusion of time/space boundaries, for the *committee determined and decreed that hereafter all authorized memorials were to be distinctly oversized, [...] staring off into some indeterminate horizon [...] the figure not the horizon* (15).

2) Complementing the circumnavigating structural/plot device is the use of Whitmanian catalogues and lists—there are so many fine examples of this, it is hard to select. See for instance this surprising, absorbent exfoliation (alphabetized no less and more particulate than Leaves Grass, crossed with a Rabelaisian feast-day and a dash of Lewis Carroll), tough to rein in:

~~the Lord God has seen fit in His Infinite to keep a steady supply of bricks and bracks on
Hand, to create, one can copiously presume, aqueducts and arcades, bridges and
barricades, cook's chambers and campanile, Darby & Joan, egesta and elevator
family trees and fantasies, geoducks and geographies, hibachis and high persuade
reliefs, incandescent lamps, the impresa of great gentlemen, jets, jerkins and jost
houses, all ajumble, Kremfins and Kulturkamfs, languid lance corporals, major leagu
Mahdi, the vertical spread of Mrs. Murphy's bed, nabobs, netherworlds, Oregon an
onanistic ontology, pater's noster and the queen's quadrangle, riverrun with steelhea
rocketships, sarcophagi and sarsaparilla, sugar-free soda water, suitable for silksoak
tin tabernacles and throbbing temples, the salted substitution of you for me and vis
versa, wonder and winsome exultation, the reptilian wisdom of Yankeedom and ever
fêted zymosis, though let us not omit His marketplaces, department stores, all floor
and their pumped coteries, barbarous butchers, decant bankers, evangels who str
feathers to fish, commanding flies, blind beggars begging all written prescription,
slack-bellied dancer, canvassing for sonnet crowns, and genuine cowboys with
mirrored eyes, there's brass bistoury and scarlet barrooms, there's where they make
wigs from plaits of brunet hair and minds from yellow paper, there's a peripatetic
baker but no candlestick maker (7-8)~~

Roll over, dear Whitman. Here's our new original. There are also the myriad culinary lists
(see 10), the fun of *crisis jubilee* (12). The very exclamation—*I hurl myself into the viscer*
(128)—has, I might add, a distinctly Whitmanic exuberance.

3) Referencing her own style, Place acknowledges *no pattern to it whatsoever* (21-22). Of course
this is not entirely true. Rather, there is no privileged point of entry; a hierarchy between clauses
cannot be maintained in the ever-present pressure of existing; thus grammar calls not for
subordinating clauses but instead the phrasal unit, which Whitman so refined. As Angus Fletcher
has written:

“Whitman uses the chopping, discontinuous rhythm of asyndeton, of which
Longinus, writing in late antiquity, speaks in chapters 19 to 22 of the famed treatise, *On
the Sublime*. Here are some examples: He came ... he saw ... he conquered; I am the
man ... I suffered ... I was there. These jagged bits of asyndeton force the listener to
imagine hidden meanings and connections lying between, which in turn lead the reader
to imagine a cohesion and coherence which is all the more powerful as it is merely
suggested by ellipsis, by the whole having been perpetually cut into pieces.”²

Place's asyndeton, of a piece with her phrasings, levels transcendence: *he groaned the
and coughed, and died* (27). Later *men were dropped, tossed and buried* (126). Fletcher
defines the phrase as such:

“A cadenced thought, coming through inflected cadenced melody. Most important of
all, in grammar, it is any group of two or more words that form a sense-unit, either
expressing a thought fragmentarily or as a sentence element not containing
predication but having the force of a single part of speech ... The key idea here is the

Of course it is the “larger union” or “reuning” that this book both desires and forestalls. The emphasis upon the phrase, however, befits the philosophical preference for the contingent, the nodal point within conflux, and the transitive. Place’s phrasal cumulations do not reach a final crescendo—they fall and rise and dip again into the dark wood.

4) Another key feature of this work is its pleasure in language (*for I stand accused, John, circumnavigation* [19])—pure play (*I’m aware torts are as tarts* [80]), puns (*I’m chockful of aimless optimism* [53]), grim ironies (*the waste of perfectly good violence* [81]); paradox (*there are none so quick as the dead* [122]), archaisms, catachresis (in the narrator’s ode to his lost boots more mourned than his lost legs, he describes them lavishly: *beautiful as a lady’s bare bottom, those skins stitched together with the care of a surgeon, one of the good ones, a set of silver perils in his breast pocket, and a cat’s unsleeved touch* [7]), metaphors that stretch the boundaries of comparison—and the stew that all these constitute. Place has tapped into the great riverbed of linguistic history, and there doesn’t seem a second of lax prose. Her facility in revamping tired cliché thrills; a few shall suffice for now, and let the reader detect the many other tired truisms she has made alive: *therein lies the nub* (10); *from candle to cave* (14); *mud in your eye* (16); *best laid plans covered mirrors lie* (54) or *nothing is as nothing does* (63).

5) The text also has extended passages of allegory (also displacing the relationship between foreground and background). The most notable ones animate Time (in fact, *Time was running out of very tall shoes* [48], and *was not impressed, he already bore a heavy string of annexed riches noosed round the neck* [47]) and Fame (cf. 70).

6) The language of *Dies* is perforce extreme—considering its depiction of war violence: the reality of the images are so intense they seem exaggerated. A young recruit’s hands are cut off on the wire, they are *supplicate hands* (126); and then, reminiscent of other war narratives, a man is *blown clean out of his clothes and part of his carcass* (127); yet another must hold his arteries between his teeth to keep from bleeding to death. One wound is figured as *unhitching the fabric* (120); yet another depicts a *leg tucked under his arm* (123). Then there is the plain face of complicity in the tumult: *I put a grenade in the crook of a passerby’s arm* (124).

7) The above characteristics contribute to what might be most conveniently identified as “baroque” style. In his book on Leibnitz: *The Fold*, Gilles Deleuze provides a working definition of the texture of the baroque:

“As a general rule the way a material is folded is what constitutes its texture. It is defined less by its heterogenous and really distinct parts than by the style by which they become inseparable by virtue of particular folds. [...] The new status of the object, the objectile, is inseparable from the different layers that are dilating, like so many occasions for meanders and detours. In relation to the many folds that it is capable of becoming, matter becomes a matter of expression.”³

Clearly, as the anatomy above suggests, I am caught up in Place’s detours and folds, interpretative becoming avenues radiating and “dilating” at “different layers.” Perhaps most significantly, the

baroque provides a psychological staining—often to nightmarish effect. Thus we always inhabit consciousness, even in its dissociations. Ariadne has offered a thread to move us through the labyrinth, and the reader will no doubt tug on it with some desperation. This strand, amid the textual maneuvering, enfolds us in a situation that might be bluntly summarized: one man (the narrator, legless (or *stumped*), addresses another man, armless. There is no end of jokes made on this score: the narrator obsessively puns upon both the loss of his own footing (*losing one leg is stuffed with significance* [6]) and upon this disarmament (*you can wave bye-bye to your intestine, if you still have arms* [5]; *for an armless man, you have a habit of pointing things out* [10]; *you ‘re very handy* [58]). The addressee is apparently making a stew; the setting is late evening (or early morning), when it is still dark and obscure in some encampment. The fear of attack hovers (*I’d light a candle and pray, if I weren’t afraid of snipers* [4]) over the already dismembered. What makes this wondrous is that the “frame” can recede, becoming a “fold” with little effort; in the baroque, “this fluidity or viscosity that carries everything along an imperceptible slope” (one can’t have end-stops and viscosity); contrast to the Gothic, the “[b]aroque underlines matter: either the frame disappears totally, or else it remains, but, despite the rough sketch, it does not suffice to contain the mass that spills over and passes up above.”⁴ Yet the stew-side scene is our homing ground, the voice pulling us in through his address to the other, but the narration behaves as if this frame has already happened or is about to happen, or that it exists in some impossible “ablative” present. I have already alluded to the elaborate time mechanics of the text but I want to add how it seamlessly mixes up the tenses: the narrator runs, and is running from fire, as if simultaneously. For, in fact, *all things being the undoing the very thing they constitute* (50). We may resist the undoing, especially at bayonet point. With all this philosophizing, I do nevertheless think that the frame reassures us, is cozy—the kind of coziness we recognize from Beckett. After all, ingenious to the death, *it’s lovely to be brewing a bit of tea, even if you have to cut off your eyelids and use them for cups* (9).

The scene of address dilates outward to the story of coming to the *donjon*; we’ve been here before at its *door proper*, and in fine mythic form, going through the grotesquerie of *a corridor strung with cages [...] jangled and wind-whipped* (73). *Donjon* is a trigger word (Dungeon, Don Juan, the John the lowest tier in hell, and so on); it registers as medieval thrusting with dragons and the like and also fits into Place’s phantasmagoria; moreover, the text recreates Dante’s underworld: *I saw before me pasture not imagined but envisioned [...] wandering in a dark wood* (85); throughout (and especially here) the peritactic cadences are such that I am inclined to scan them as separate lines, lay them out like a poem; one of my reconstructions will have to do:

the captain barked at us to just keep marching
for it was Friday
and we were tramping still upwards,
and it was mostly dark,
as noted,
though a dark less variable than the black of
night, which,
like the ocean it discolors,
reveals itself to be of changeable depth,
abated by a passing cloud and finding star-lit
augment in a sudden clearing,
the sea is taffeta to the sky
who waves more violent in its too-gentle
unending,

This parsing of course begs the question of poetry versus prose (I haven't even mentioned all of the text's internal rhymes, consonance and assonance); lineation even with enjambment allows us to catch our breath. And this Place resists.

As we descend, we meet the guide of the underground (i.e. trench as cut into the underworld), an old man who *drew deep on the unlit cigarette* (103); he has *mentholate* and *pond-smell* breath (105); he offers one-way and round-trip tickets, but the latter he rips up. At this juncture, we may be asking: is the narrator dead or alive? The seer tells the narrator: *if you are mainly blameless, there's nothing to be done* (105). (This is a bit like Eliot's praise of Baudelaire, who in writing the poetry of the damned makes room for possible expiation.) There's profound futility in an ascent where stairs take the speaker up to a *circle before us larger than the circle we had just completed, and the next circle larger than that one, and again, each circumambulation taking forty minutes longer than the round before* (73). Circumambulation defines both hell and the pleasure of language, being lost in it. The speaker falls (or remembers falling) through many tiers, all of them skeleton and corpse-lined: *as I turned away from the dying, a cavern grew beneath my feet, I fell, as we all fall [...] cavern's sides 're coated in skeletons [...] as we fell, the skeletons become increasingly fleshed* (95). This sequence literalizes the vertical push of the text so that we fall (and fell) through a layered decay, until our narrator recounts a dead body *beneath him, a woman, hacked and overturned [...] then two women, conjoined by skull, heart, [...] named Rosenrot* (96). This figure of the dead multiplying woman builds upon Place's reaming the form of the Elizabethan blazon (*swarm of insects [...] perfect shape of a perfect woman* [88]). In Place's underworld, we are both in the charnel house and contiguous with a dead goddess, witnessing the *awful mouths of screaming men and the empty houses of their appalled eyes* (129). There is a startling hallucinatory quality to these passages in *Dies*, and indeed, we find ourselves wandering in a wood where we can't see the wood for the trees. And this rivets and satisfies—the going between clarity and density: *I saw the world through a microscope or not at all, [...] suddenly I understood everything, or not at all* (88).

The proverbial “I” of this text, slipping between seeing and blindness, hooks us through his insistent address to a *you*, as I have said. This *you* accrues multiple names of endearment (*my tacket-soldier darling* [114]) and cognates throughout: John, Johnny, Jose, Jenny, Jack, Jan, Ivan, Sean, Jenkins, Jesse, Jon, Jonnel, Johann, Johnson, Johansen, Jean (not in order of appearance). (John the disciple found the Word and eternal life in Christ; here no such luck.) The narrator wants to pinpoint and identify the “other” (as reflexive of the self's reality): this is the desperate gambit of a landscape *persons becoming persons* (127), the green garden of decay. *Dies* then is a Prufrockian (“let us go then, you and I”) address to the dead, a love song of sorts—sad, angry, convulsive, hysteric *you, you, good for nothing but stew* (58). Hanging over it all is the *despondency of the future conditional* (48). Throughout, the speaker imagines some time to come where the duo might picnic (*they'll be a paradise and a goddamn picnic* [128]), they might still dance: *Oh, dance with me, Janny, just dance [...] before we pass through rose and ash and enter the great donjon* (63). “I” joins with “thou” only in the stacking up of anguish: *my dear, and in our charred and homely paradise I sing to you, Johann, my Jean's aubade, 'tis of thee, me Johnny, my enemy, mine Agnus Dei, I sing and dedicate my denial of the morning* (129). We come across such pitched moments and sequences in many documents of war literature and film. I am thinking here of the famous Wilfred Owen poem, “Strange Meeting,” where the poet/soldier, in the underworld of the trenches or perhaps in a posthumous hell, addresses another man, who eventually rejoins: “I am the enemy you killed.” Ally and enemy, lover and killer—these roles shapeshift and twine. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930) ends with a Frenchman, lying prone and

dying next to a German (also near death), whom he caresses and addresses: “mon enemie, mon amie”
These are the dialectics that play out within Place’s borders.

In the end, the other is both enemy and beloved—silent as the tomb, dumb with a blackened tongue and the staring eyes of a corpse. This is a silence as maddening as Prophyria was to her lover: *still you shall speak, for surely you’re aware of the rule of corpus delecti* (129). What remains is, however poignant sentiment, the other’s ear is a *darling shell, that wax cup into which I’ve poured my consolation* (130). The evidence, moreover, lies in the reader, drawn into what Whitman called “adhesive love,” what W.C. Williams dubs the “fraternal embrace” of reader and writer. Place’s taut suspense accompanies us into the abyssal dawn light, Bunyan’s “Slough of Despond,” but all the while we must bear up our end in this intimate, lively exchange. *Dies* hypothesizes: *there is no difference between moments of life and moments of death, save sentiment* (81). Such serious distinctions come with Place’s coruscate, playful humor: *all unhappy families are identical as apricots* (49). Laughton shakes us. Where we unite is in our *yeasty need for immortality, that common hunger for the forevermore* (55). Of the writer (parsing it into a poem form), we might say:

*helpless she is in her occlusion,
beauteous she is in our peregrination* (55)

Put another way, Place is the mother of the disjuncture: *I’s de constant conditional, de dead beloved laugh* (101). Welcome to Inverness; welcome to *Dies*. This is a delightfully quotable text, but I have to stop someway, somehow: *you have to start somewhere, especially to finish* (6).

Susan McCab

Halifax

2005

¹In her introduction of Place at the TrenchArt gala reading, 2005.

² Angus Fletcher, *A New Theory For American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of the Imagination* (Harvard 2005), 159.

³Gilles Deleuze, 36-7.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze quoting Wolfflin, 123.

Dies: A Sentence

The maw that rends without tearing, the maggoty claw that serves you, what, my baby buttercup prunes stewed softly in their own juices or a good slap in the face, there's no accounting for history. In any event, even such a one as this one, O, we're knee-deep in this one, you and me, we're practical puppets, making all sorts of fingers dance above us, what do you say, shall we give it another whirl? we can go naked, I suppose, there's nothing to stop us and everything points in that direction, do you think there will be much music later and of what variety, we've that, at least, now that there's nothing left, though there's plenty of pieces to be gathered by the wool-coated orphans and their musty mums. they'll put us in warm wicker baskets, cover us with a cozy blanket of snow, and carry us home walking carefully through the rubble and around the landmines, or visa versa, poor little laddy's lost his daddy, *pauvre* unminted lamb, you'd give him a chuck on the chin if you still had arms, sure as I pitch myself into a highland fling for the sake of the neighbors, but they say or at least said once and we're very quiet we might hear them again, that all of us will reunite with all of us when the time comes, our bits and pieces will cling-a-ling to our cores like fillings rag a magnet, think how big we'll be then, we'll spread from sea to sea, sky's the limit for philomel and firmament, and there will be Indians and buffalo and a hero's welcome, I've always wanted a hero's welcome, it's due, said the capitulate archduke, doubtless they'll put us in long black cars and someone's sure to have a picnic that's the beauty of it, someone's always sure to have a picnic, and we'll laugh when they salt and pepper their hard eggs and be glad to lend our long bones for rude goalposts, what's that, that sounds nothing, you say, right again, nothing walks heavily, nothing stomps about, the big turd, carding its beard with a baleen comb, and lovingly licking the mirror in the eggcup, it fixes red-hot ingots to its ears and pirouettes in a pineneedle shawl, showing itself off to one and all, it's a braggart and a pimper this nothing, ups the short hairs nonetheless, doesn't it, but that's all right, continue making your steaks sun's swallowed and we've plenty of hours to morn, assuming there's to be another dawn, I'm keeping the faith on that one, my friend, my comrade, my comparison, why I'd light a candle and pray, if I weren't afraid of snipers, still, a campfire seems safe enough, at least for cooking, no one'd be so mean as to shoot a man before his supper, what's the sport in that, better to let a body leisure and suffer knowing there's no time to digest, for it's utter contempt you're after, that and the absolute beauty of wasted sweet butter, it was important that the last bite taste better, though saltless, we've S. Maladroit to clap for that, the silvertongued one, he who proved birds traitors for singing what must be sung, thoughtless, *dolce*, thoughtless, still, perhaps the next one will use a beer batter, make a nice soda bread, slather it with the whitest spread, that's good shooting, my darling, right between hiccoughs, speaking of which, how's your arm, you complained earlier, though quietly, you didn't want to disturb my concentration, I was squeezing oranges into cans and setting up camp, there's so much to do before a battle, don't you agree, put shoes into trees and try our hair in different styles, thoughtfully chalked some names and addresses on our backs to facilitate false identification of our remains, unfortunately it makes us better targets, but this sort of thing can't be helped, still, I hear you, for a cold moment I thought you were saying your morning prayers, till I remembered our night had fallen and tomorrow was a holiday, or will be, certainly they'll take time off to commemorate our exhausted sacrifice and someone else's dry valor with a parade and a picnic, someone will cook chicken before or after as they always do, the cowards, but I'm looking forward to the little boy eating watermelon and the girl who sucks a spoonful of Nutella while twisting her hair in rings around her forefinger, no, of course you don't, you lost your arms, I remember, wasn't I just asking you about that as well, you think I don't pay attention, but I do, you've no idea how much I care, why I cried

when you lost your right arm, though I confess I was a bit annoyed about the left, it seemed careless that point, and what was the point of that, surely you were signaling something, everyone's known for some time now there's meaning to be evacuated from everything, lined up and airlifted, not unlike Saigon, years from now, it was, we'll be so proud then, we'll see the world with the eyes of dead men, don't get technical, the thing is then we'll understand the raw fruit of our labors as if we'd set up a stand and sold them by the side of the road, and maybe we will, hang a white sign saying something and display them in green plastic baskets, like summer strawberries, or stack them in Euclidean pyramids, like melons or mangos or even apples, something with its seeds safely inside, that's the problem with history, you once said, spitting into the fire, it treats itself vegetable, or oak, you altered and opined, awkward it is, too, boasting of its spread and shade when you and I both know it's got nothing to go on about, and they'd see it too, in the next millennium, this time slouching to Brigadoon but not in Jerusalem, watch it, now, laugh like that and you're sure to attract shooters, I'm telling you next to picking off a man with a snootful of *cerises aux chocolats*, or a brandy Alexander, they like nothing better than to go gunning for the grinning, the sorry bastard busting a gut, there it goes, you can wave bye-bye to your intestine, if you still had arms, that is, again, but why are you complaining you've got your legs, more than I can say, I've come permanently seated, lost them both at the knee, one fell bloody swoop, must have been a cannonball or missile or maybe a villanelle, I wasn't paying attention, leaving me my itemless list, unpinned as an unfoundling, with the same untoward prospect and I loved those legs as well, especially the left, he followed the right so unthinkingly, he was a good soldier, if I can be so bold, he swung in a rhythm not his own, quite contented, he was enormous, attuned to the beat of the street and the sound of the violin, though he didn't care much for opera, what passes these days as poetry, he was a simpler sort, purer of heart, his mind unarticulated and most refined, why most evenings you'd find him propped on an Ottoman, one of the real ones, Oriental, with a pointed red hat and a furious mustache, most ornamental, though still and all a good Christian, couched in fickle malice, but the leg didn't mind, he was a good egg, name was Bob, I laughed at that one, said it suited him consonant, being nothing fancy, not like that other leg, Warrington, Warrington E. Wanderlick, or Augenblich, no, that's not it, he had no agnominations, didn't think he needed it, he was egg-proud, independent, struck out on his own each morning and never looked forward or back, I suppose in his own way he was decent enough, though somewhat stand-offish to good old Bob, now they're both gone and I'm not sure why, losing one leg is stuffed with significance, but to have both devested like a couple of breadcrumbs, what's the point of that? I'm not certain, I'm stumped, that's the truth of it, sure as I'm squatting poolside, though there's still the fire, and that's nice, given the dark, do you think the wolves're out yet, they ought be, the air suffuse with the stench of brave young muscle, which by tomorrow'll be jugged meat, but no matter, the great beasts will slather the pale unwed flanks with spittle and savory barbeque, lick their lips thickly purpled and caked at the corners with wet white foam, their eyes're Maundy Thursday moon, and the heat from their beating tongues'd melt any man's mold and when's the last time you got eaten by a bit player in a fairy tale, sure it's an honor, it's an honor to be such a goner, if I had a hat, I'd do it, lend me yours for a moment, that's a good man, there, there's a tip of the lid to what'll make a meal out of me and you, to the time-honored tradition of finding the creature inside whose potted stomach we might nestle safe and round, though you and I are hardly twins and Rome wasn't built in a day, not like today, but you have to start somewhere, especially to finish, and a dog's gut is as good as it gets for a sonovabitch such as myself, I'm being modest, mostly, but you have to admit there's a striking resemblance between the halves of us, and if I still had my legs, you'd allow how we're about equal in height in our stocking feet, I miss my legs, did I mention that, and my boots, beautiful in their velvet addition, beautiful as a lady's bare bottom, those skins stitched together with the care of a surgeon, one of the good ones, a set of silver pens in his breast pocket, and a cat's unsleeved touch, why those

boots were alive, they breathed easy as kittens and stayed dog-faithful at the feet, they had the soles
a saint, ignorant of stones, slings and arrows, though not, I would qualify, impervious to the odd nail
they were long-suffering and lucky, lucky as a pair of sevens or a single eleven, lucky as four-leaf
clovers and four-eyed Irishmen, not for me, naturally, but certainly for the one who got me, a tall
blond man, I imagine, strapping, if that can still be said without blinking, big, in any event, a man with
hands like hams and thighs the size of roast pigs, a happy man, content in his apple-scented way,
man who wipes his mouth with the back of a broad palm and keeps a dark pint running through the
veins, a stout-hearted man in the days when there were such fellows, and ever shall be, if I'm an
judge of the Almighty, the Lord God has seen fit in His Infinite to keep a steady supply of bricks and
bricks on Hand, to create, one can copiously presume, aqueducts and arcades, bridges and barricades,
cook's chambers and campanile, Darby & Joan, egesta and elevators, family trees and fantasias,
geoducks and geographies, hibachis and high persuaded reliefs, incandescent lamps, the impresario
great gentlemen, jets, jerkins and joss houses, all ajumble, Kremllins and Kulturkamfs, languid languors
corporals, major league Mahdi, the vertical spread of Mrs. Murphy's bed, nabobs, netherworlds,
Oregon and onanistic ontology, pater's noster and the queen's quadrangle, riverrun with steelhead
rocketships, sarcophagi and sarsaparilla, sugar-free soda water, suitable for silksoaks, tin tabernacles
and throbbing temples, the salted substitution of you for me and visa versa, wonder and winsome
exultation, the reptilian wisdom of Yankeedom and the ever-fêted zymosis, though let us not omit His
marketplaces, department stores, all floors, and their pumped coteries, barbarous butchers, decadent
bankers, evangels who strap feathers to fish, commanding flies, blind beggars begging all written
prescription, a slack-bellied dancer, canvassing for sonnet crowns, and genuine cowboys with
mirrored eyes, there's brass bistoury and scarlet barrooms, there's where they make wigs from plait
of brunet hair and minds from yellow paper, there's a peripatetic baker but no candlestick maker, He
finished fashioning light, been there, done that, as the newer testaments will affix, His huts to and for
His homemade ironworks, steelworks, plasticworks, rubber and siliconworks, sites of pomp
deconstruction and the blackberry patch, resigned office buildings, antiquated granaries, granny
drywall hatchery, the steady tick of His whitewashed chicken roosts and plain pine stalls, horsele
pens for pigs, cattle, and men, the tippy T of a real red Indian, my brother's leaking mausoleum and
the poet's drunken pink and blue adobe, penny-ante apartment buildings and tall women's flats, in
short, all such compound crematoria, dust bunnying dust, ash jug, jug jug, ash, all erected from such
rabbit-fingered coptics such as him who shot my legs out from under me, the lucky sod, out there
singing the ballad of the bandoleer, no doubt, and me here, without, nonetheless I'll dance by his
figged moonlight and genuflect to the bend sinister across his breast, he's a good man and a better
shot, I'm proof of that, sure as the pudding I'm standing in, do you wonder whether the dawn will
come, knowing there's to be a battle, perhaps it will forego the day, after all, it's seen plenty of tanks
and tons of artillery, witnessed men struck like matchsticks and horses shatter like November leaves,
the day's got no more need of numbers, and might just stay, hidden behind night's day, or owlsh prey
moon to moon, replete once one poor slob catches a masher whilst simmering a bit of tea, thigh-dec
in muck, he was, his rank indistinct, the shoulders having been stripped of insigne to thwart sa
snipers, or having gotten nowhere fast in this man's army, this army of ein, he had a fine freckled face
and cheeks broadly aspired as a carpenter's thumbs, an honest boy, anyone could see that, even caught
such as he was, curled around the lick of flame by which he was slowly heating his tin cup, content
if he were standing in stocking feet in a wood-floored kitchen, complete, blue-flowered curtains
unflapping in the frosted double window, the stove's aglow and there's a faint smell of potato and the
promise of sausage, someone's filled a pitcher with yellow onions and set it out like a bowlful of
chrysanthemums, and as the black wind wrassles its walrus, it's lovely to be brewing a bit of tea, even
if you have to cut off your eyelids and use them for cups, but it's all a clutch of bird calls now, no

that the youngster's gone up in a fluff of smoke, spattering the sides of the slit with slip turned stic then too-solid stuck, it's better than cement, more direct, in any case, than even slavery, which, when the final account's tallied, and we're all standing around with one finger up our bums, thoughtful supplied by the quartermaster, one bum per person, no matter how ill-suited to the task, you'll get your cap-clutcher, your unshaven greasy hollow-eyed rotten-toothed fortuneless fuck to palm off whilst you insert a digit deep in his aching behind, even then slavery will be seen as a system of applied labor, it's abstract, to a certain extent, dependant on composition rather than representation, quite theosophic, when you get right down to it, you see what I mean, it's the difference between either and or all over again, don't roll your tongue at me, you know it's true, when the final note sounded, and we're gathered by the barren banks of the unvexed brown water, Suellen, Scarlett and me, it's the Wishka that'll take the cake, that and a silver-plated set of unpenned sorrows, for there's nothing worse than a paper cut, given the algebra of universal sets and the principle of absolute complements, did I mention I missed my boots, good boots they were, to boot, they waltzed every evening last April, with or without me, they danced in Paris, before it was Paris, you know, back when it was just a hole in the ground and a foregone conclusion, as this will be, not Paris, I mean, but the other thing, a matter of fact, Paris, city of lights and apostrophes, how I miss those boots, I know they're of no use to me, that's not the point to sentiment, is it, after all, we're way past having been hinged to feelings, that was the day before tomorrow, the twelfth, if it will be, but do you think they will be a morrow, I've asked repeatedly, you're right again, for an armless man, you have a habit of pointing things out, therein lies the nub, and have I congratulated you on your fine fire, it takes a real man to rub sticks together and come up with something, I tried it once and found myself with a small basket, large enough for a smallish picnic or largish infant, but oddly resistant to flame, flame retardant, if you want to know the honest truth, and why shouldn't you, why can't we speak frankly especially now, especially me, though if you like, I'll affect a German accent and you can sound American, it's all the same to me, squatting before such a fine fire, did you notice how the picnic creeps in back there, like ants sneaking on black wire feet, you could spend all day swatting or stamping, someone could, not us, we couldn't stamp or swat if our lives depended on it, and they will, you can be sure of that, one's life always depends on the one thing one can't possibly do, such as be two, why, it's a test of faith, and why shouldn't it be, after all, no one's handing out rounds of fresh buttered bread and terra cotta pots of pink salt, it's sink or swim, draw or drink, and I can't think of a better way to spend one's evening, the sky's black as a government envelope and we'll stand-to come morning, one of us will, assuming the rosy-fingered don't wrap itself round our throats first, what have you made there, John, lamb-stew, just joshing, just having you on, it's a joke, Jeff, to think you'd have a thumb-snip of mutton, I expect you've made a hash of it, using, correct me if I'm wrong, there's a nice chunk of firewood you can cosh me on the cap with if I make a mistake, using the unyolked marrow of a boar's jawbone, and a crow's gritted craw, stuffed, if I'm not sorely *s'éraillé*, we're speaking frankly now, aren't we, or is it just me, with roast walnuts and quince, the fresh spoor of a centaur, a couple of buttered parsnips, sliced thin as lined paper, the plum of a pawpaw, a swarm of walleyed lobster, a footsore chocolate Labrador, skinned by a quilted whore in a pinafore, wielding a brass whisk, why such mouthfeels should be outlawed, and so they are, via the whereas and wherefore and therefore and furthermore whosoever and evermore and moreover forevermore never again *amen gehen* the fire-new way of the tyrannosaur, as such stirrings shall heretofore be perfected by signors standing outside corner drugstores, wearing blue pharmacists' aprons with their names sewn above the left breast pocket, they will iron their aprons every morning, the tip of the iron carefully pressed around the loops and curls of their consonants and delicately dipped at the prick and pluck of the vowels, as leaves, seeking leave, do leaves of leaves deceive, it's a first-rate *plat du jour* you've got there, my friend, seasoned right, with a pinch of *sel* and a fistful of *Pfeffer*, my mouth's watering like

a fresh warden, I bet even our enemy's salivating at the stew you're brewing, this *ragout*, the thickthin soup, he's dreaming of croutons and *lard de poitrine*, it's butter for his spinach, the speechless bastard, he's out there now, juices running at the mouth, teeth dark as a tinman's bitch, he's got no neck, but a wolf's wooly pelt grows directly from his shoulders and shags of oilskin anoint his sour and hairy ass, he bites into another bloody birdwing, and sucks the air with an ox's snout, nostrils, the foul stench of him smelt in Kensington, Karlsruhe and Cucamonga, they'll pour it into small molds and make smaller lead soldiers, suitable for melting, and all the while, us here in our smocking, why look at you, as if you could do such a thing, you're as adorable as an Alpine schoolgirl, are you wearing your hair in braids then, you should, it suits you, whereupon, as I was dogmatizing, you are a good country cook and a better pallbearer, after all, despite the cold and heat, I'm in no ready rush, it's still night, and you can hear them creeping about out there, setting up wire, cutting through wire, patching lines and practicing television, the knock of a nail on a split board and the hawk of an avuncular cough, creeping about, like ants, I should say, but don't worry, you won't catch me at that again, it's the outdoors that puts me in mind for a meal, but bless my toes if I've got the stomach for it, no, you're right again, right as wildflowers and dear Winifred, what a lovely girl, I'd marry her if she were her sister, the one with the turned-up nose and the well-bitten nails, she's raw as an oyster and warm as a cuspidor, she warbles like a wren, the worrywart, and can whistle *M. Sweetheart's Gone to Warsaw* backwards and forwards and now and again, she sits in her wiffletree and loves nobody but me, though I've the guts of an ostrich, you're absolutely spot-on, dead to rights, thank you for pointing that out, you're a thoughtful fellow, you use your head, you're the sort that makes something of a crisis, puts it in a pastry-shell, adds a dab of sherry and a shot of flame, *voilà*, crisis jubilee, though I applaud your capital lucubration, you have sense, son, as the French would say, you add one to one with creamy progression, and soon as we get to Paris, you'll be the chat of *la ville*, they'll speak curiously of your accomplishments and someone's sure to put up a bronze statue hovering hatless over an eternal flame and a fleet of daffy-downillies, yes, of course they should give you a horse, and a chestful of metal, they'll give you that gratis, the committee for the erection of monumentals which feels no need to capitalize, having quite enough of that in the day-to-day, the distinguished members of the committee, to wit, the Hon. François Crever, son of a miller, as a boy, François loved nothing more than to sit by a hayrick and enjoy its many discomforts, the musty air of the drying grasses and the needles of straw poking persistently through the rough weave of his father's broadcloth shirt, François wanted to be a poet, he'd heard, somewhere, that poets see things differently, or not at all, and as François knew from the time his soft spot cemented, that he, *aussi*, saw things differently, he could spend a month naming a trove fledgling, trying to find that perfect combination of the mythic and the contemporary, the thing that rang somehow said and yet still unspoken, that connoted both the bird's Iscariot wing and its oblivious eye, the boy took a hunk of chalk and scratched Greek gods, down to the demi-, on the stone walls of his father's water mill, mindful of the kidneys of wheat inside, he fed his sparrow pomegranate seeds and gooseberries and wrote odes to its future oracles, the sky, he noted, was mostly metaphorical, while the elbow was not, and the boy took to wearing caps made of flour sacks, bleached till close to blinding, then re-sprinkled with his father's second-fruit, keeping head and shoulders perpetually powdered, he wore wooden shoes and taught his sparrow tricks, to swoop and loop-de-lou, to rise and sharply dive, to flutter and land in the gentle cup of its master's hand, to drink from a thimble of water and peck seed from his pink tongue, he tied a length of silk to one of the sparrow's legs and the bird flew directly overhead wherever they walked, fancy giving flight to fancy, and one plumless night, as the boy dreamt, he dreamt he was in a great unroofed barn, black rafters slotting the sky like bottoms of boats seen from the sea-bottom, the barn was full of stepped warbling, sweet song cannoning the ear, sweet singing rifling the eye, he saw a thousand husbanded wrens and a thousand single pelicans, a thousand swarms

and a thousand pigeons, a thousand peacocks, plucked, their blind beauty more blinded, a thousand kites and ducks and orioles, turtledove and quail, racked in guarded vitality, a thousand hamstrung hawks and ruff-rung pheasants, a thousand nominative owls, shrieking in skulled desolation, a thousand barren storks and a thousand fell falcons, a thousand spat eggs spotting the straw, and those scattered warrens where nests had been excavated, pecked the chick of the lark and the nightingale, scavenging for seed among the scavenged bones of their scavenged brothers, finding the doubled corn double sweet, the unsung barn was black and white with bird, and the boy trembled and woke to find the bright leg of his sparrow tied to his bedpost, and only the leg, and the boy wept and understood he was to study law, whereupon he did, and sobriety jacketed him like a statue's verdigris and his bones baked to bare facts, in testate time he was known as a solid solicitor, and, after he amended a certain codicil in the governor's contract to purchase a particular plot of land, it was a small plot, pocket-sized, involving no more than four men, strategically placed, amended it to the tune of a Johnny Mercer song, he was named judge of the township, where he proved himself sight-worthy and embarked on greater and more sacramental displays of sound and common sense as a circuit justice, his most famous decision being the striking of a miners' camp, which caused the miners and mine owners no end of headache but saved an excellent number of Chinamen and canaries, in due course, then took his tea and final soda crackers in a red wing chair and was given a mahogany-backed brass plaque with his name and seasons of service engraved in fancy Huguenot script, the whole cast in paraffin and set on a stack of dice, there were three rounds of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," he admired French, because all French will settle in the South, by the sea, and named to the Committee and Mr. Reginald Pecoek, who walked life in an uncircumflexed line from candle to cave, Mr. Pecoek never used fewer than three forks for any seated meal and insisted on rigor, liberally applied, Mr. Pecoek believed in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, He descended into hell, the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead, and in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic and apostolic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting, amen, Mr. Pecoek made no bones about it, for he thought it augured well to bend one waist but once, and Miss Emily Otis, not that Emily Otis, you monk, the other one, the one with the freckles and plenty of sass, Miss Emily wept great golden tears whenever she contemplated the need for memorials, but had to admit of their necessity, she was a level-headed girl, she would balance a glass of port at parties and the gang would laugh like gangbusters, Miss Emily would wed, tuck two or three chickens to bed, to bed, sleepy-head, she never lost her temper, keeping it safely secured by a thousand silver threads, Miss Emily insisted on netted beauty and was glad as gladiolas to meet Frau Shöpfen, the young widow who wore her weeds so prettily, she kept a snap of her honey in a scrimshaw locket and smelt always of loganberry and dew, the two ladies and gentlemen were augmented by eight more, Messrs. J. Kunst, Simon Fitzgerald, Jean-Paul Luc, the renown horseman, Father Matthew L'Hippocampe, Mrs. J.Q. Windsor, Dr. James Jones, and the twins, Peter and Mark, who took minute notes and tidied up after meetings, the Memorial Committee determined and decreed that hereafter all authorized memorials were to be distinctly oversized, naturally rendered, and shown the subject staring off into some indeterminate horizon, preferably on horseback, the figure, not the horizon, though perhaps that was a mistake after all, what do you think, after all, it's your bread they'll be dipping in brass and, watch, your legs'll be gone green before your legs, that's a good one, that is, that's ripe, chum, high, as the *Bürgermeister*s say, locking their thumbs across their tum-tum, the fat Phoenician bastards, though I know envy's a sin and lust a chore, and that they suffer, I doubt less that I not doubt more, they suffer and suffer from such suffering, for greed clutches their gilds

guts and sloth purples their goutish feet, they've got a touch of the *boiteux*, you know, it comes and goes, weather-bound as a book of Tyrian sonnets, but just between us, I could use a strain of hand arthritis, and I freely confess I miss my sabots, faithful they were, despite their footloose nature, though who between us is not given to a well-turned ankle and the casual flip of a thin-boned wrist, why hand and foot are the torturous measure all things, the first measures, coming most convenient to mind, fearful they were, like their sad country cousins, for if this was a map, and I'm not saying it isn't, that's not germane to the argument, it's a minor premise, nothing more, for my syllogism, which, if I'm very lucky and it's about goddamned time, will prove an occludent tautology, such as, if this were a map, we'd be home by now, we're barely a foot away from where you stand and I could walk there on my hands, by anyone's estimation and on anyone's command, we'd be here in a jiffy, why the sea would mean nothing to us, we'd sniff at the rage of valleys and achoo each well-crested hilltop, and once we were back, we'd never look back, we'd would stay, you and I, put, incisive as anchored as Wales, welded as Éire, steady as the flower of Scotland, you and me, in perplexity, till they blot the eye on our *requiescat* and buttonhook the final amen, what's that, there's mud in your eye, that's nice, Johnny, a good riposte, *amigo*, you're not napping, as anyone could see, for anyone would answer where you answer back, your *amicus curiae* has real horsepower, almost American in its equanimity, how is the stew going, I hope there's fish, I could use a spot of snapper, hope, that's what I most miss, Johnny, a sense of hope, I've seen the pictures, and it was a beautiful thing, cream colored, though it's hard reading the old photographs, marbled, as they say, with light crunchy fat, slightly golden, slightly singed, no wings, whoever said that's a rotten liar, hope's heavy-set, shape like a pear or perhaps a pineapple, and polished as a courtesan's welcome, polished to a shine you could shave by and never suffer a nick, if you slit it surgically to expose a representative cross-section, you'd find meat sweet as butter beneath the fat, meat packed pink as a lady's lips but with the bed-banging potency of a water buffalo and if you cut in farther, there's a netting of nerve, thin as blue as mapped rivers, then muscle, not just any muscle, not such unstrung sadly sported by you and me, but the old kind, favored by Fortinbras and his set, carved from tulipwood and ivory, and finally the ebony pith, with its firm, dense grain and inconstant resolve, my grandfather used it to build credence, some of which stand in other people's parlours, still, the stuff retains a certain spongy interiority, which sops up other things, such as boots and hips and ceiling-tacks and ravages and rings and this dustbin quintessence, the which of which smells primarily of vanilla, rims the center of the center, this muck-made marrow is not airy, as some have claimed, nor purple-red or liver-rich, it's a dull olive lattice, composed of three things, salt, naturally, for a sailor's health and a soldier's salary, dirt, laced with iron, to ensure perpendicular growth and avoid excessive deformity, and dry lime, for quicksetting and the fast dissolve, to be unfinished in the final frame, the sad faded slob, still, you chew on chalk and smile, and there's a bright spot in that, isn't there, my friend, the sea's full of such sustaining shrimp and the wood abounds with staggering possibilities, not just the sentries, for don't forget your deserters, they're the most hopeful of the lot, they're wild-eyed with aspiration, overflowing with future, they're the runners, sure as shot, not like you and me, more proportionate natured we, still, no matter what they foretell, we're staying, put, waiting for the dawn, what do you mean we have no choice, we most certainly do, and I'll clock any dick that says different, sure as I'm to be called Stubby and you Rings, why we have the choicest choice, to go, that is, or stay, stay or go, go or stay, see what I'm saying, note the perfect pivot, conjoining choice to choice like roads to Rome, like the pitch of a pendulum or the bit in-between scale pans, well, you're right as a foregone conclusion, that's equally applicable, still, we're lousy with choice, not just those eggs and niplucked plump from the groin-pit, but options dainty and stiffly undecided as here and there, hot and cold, then and now, high and low, life and death, tea and crumpets, hymns heard and those left bachelored, and, not to state the obvious, but it's the French that pinched our preferences, they handed

them out free as pillow-peppermints, then kipped them back, they've got feet made of pink erasers and ruminant souls, and even in that you see or's eyebolt, have I commended you yet on the flattering of your vernacular, why, you look amaranthine as Mister Telquell, all green and ocean-gray, it suits you, I remember on the boat over, before that, when I woke this morning, there, I left for the train to catch the boat to bring me to the trucks to cart me to where I began walking, before that, well, I recall with a woodcut's grave precision that before I woke the morning I left for the train to catch the boat to bring me to the trucks, etcetera, I was walking with some purpose and greater determination, there, was light in that thin brown way one reads about in liberal magazines, clouds appended overhead and sun smeared everywhere, there, the road I was on was tactile, reasonably pebbled and socked with pocks of soft illustrative dirt, there were gentle pastures on either side of me, one full of sheep wanting shearing, the other, horses, well-kept, with the heavy hooves and shining shoulders of animals accustomed to the dray, there was a church, there in the distance, though what distance was hard to gauge, for there the earth was very flat and consequently compressed, there was a church with spatial designs, such as is found where and when a town begins to aspire to a city, it's best to begin with the church, *vanitas honor*, says the caterpillar, and it's something upon which we can all agree, for doesn't the fire seem friendly, especially at first, watch it there, it was a largish church, cut of soft, clear stone, its lines uniformly parallel and triangulate, all signs and cosigns gestured to a golden statue atop the tallest spire, a larger-than-life but otherwise very realistic portrayal of Mother and Child wherein Our Lady was, instead of clasping Babe to beatific breast or slinging Him on one steel hip while balancing a basket of wash on the other, holding the Lamb, out, extended at what could be called a right angle, *Theotokos*, indeed, but of what people, and as we pondered the footpath, for there were plenty of us by now, you were there as well, buttons burnished, hair unparted, we broke out packs of kiwi seed and snacked, enjoying a sip or two of good Rhine wine, some of the regular fellows started singing, *Mars is braw in crammasy, Venus in green silk gown*, and cook shook his gravy-ladle adding *the auld mune shak's her gowden feathers*, the irregulars shouted, *Their starry talk's a whee o'blethers*, the lieutenant, a rare McCormack tenor, rang out crystalline, *Name for thee a thought sparlin'*, giving the nod to the sergeant major, who baritoned, *Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn*, handing off to our attentive Corporal Dumpling, *But greet, an' in your tears ye'll droun*, and the entire company, every last mother's son, save yourself, whooped, *The haill clanjamfrie*, and by then, there we were, right where we'd left off, only farther, at the first field, not that field previously mentioned but a new field, encased in low walls of stone such as are unbedded by the farmer's plow and set aside to be used in the building of low stone walls, some of the fellows wanted to stay alongside the parapets while others maligned the apple trees and maples aligning the pasture, for a thing cannot have two shades, you see, but the captain counted us off one-two-three and the ones went up first, on account of their undisputed primacy, I was a lucky number two, a saved second to second a second assay, but H.M., standing just before me, he wrapped his paw around the warm stock of his rifle and held it tight as a mother cuddles her tot on the train, his fingers went white under the black of his nails and he licked his lips and rubbed his chin steady with the back of his free hand, repeatedly, his ears grew rosy as the daylight and he began to fuss in his wallet awhile, pulling out bits of paper and unfolding them, he'd study on each, deciding what it meant, or if it was for keeps, but each time, he'd refold the sheet along its original pleats and tuck it back inside, beneath the sheet previously examined, next he counted out his money which took more time, for he had squirreled away all his cash, draw, he was one who planned a future, then fished a stub of pencil from his hip pocket, extracted one of the aforementioned slips of paper and wrote down an amount in careful, clean hand, dating the same and signed it, I was his witness, and the amounts exact to the penny, I tell this now to unseal any doubt as to my motives, for I stand accused, John, of circumnavigation, but I have no global interests nor prone to revolution, why, by all reports I am witted thick as cream, my brains calf no gre

conceptions and leave the golden ox ungored, facts to me are simple as simple facts, as sets of noses and roses and tricolored flags, and the fact was he adjusted the leather straps on his back and wished aloud he had better socks, something was always caught between his toes, he said, it was distracting and I've no reason to doubt his charge, there's no profit in such argument, as wool will have its way and who's to say what's fabrication, he decided to dash off a postcard back home, tawoo, I'm sorry, taewoo, you say tatou, well, tatou to you too, I'm afraid I'm not following, Johnny, could you strike me a flint or draw me a map, sorry, that was a bank shot, boy, nothing personal, toooo woووو, or certainly, and a reasonable question it is, too, though I'm afraid, as with so many reasonable questions, and we have so many reasonable questions, and I'd even go so far to say, with every reasonable question, if I weren't afraid someone'd slip me a recipe for gingerbread, isn't that what Hansel and Gretel crumbed up along the trail, no, so you recall it otherwise, well, then, augment my understanding, take your time, sir, for there's no chance I'll wander off while you're amplifying your aeration or shedding illumine on that particulate trail of infamy, I've the attention of the summer sun, you say it was soda bread those two spilt along the forest and ginger's what housed the witch within, well, I'll admit, that's *ben trovato*, a perfect example of close auctorial attention, nothing slipping between your fingers, boyo, in some circles, you're so avaut you've your own axis, which favors soft-cloth caps and Spanish omelets, but still I beg a difference, the kinder wouldn't toss off a good round of soda, as any red-winged mother could tell you, and so the story's a crock and a sham, those kids went willingly, snacking on their spice-loaf all the while, the greedy piglets, they'd no notion of conservation or the mythic wood, it's a crossing, a bonus unround, why leave a line of crumbs the way you've come when you're so insistently going forth, soup to nuts, fork to knife, there's no retreat, not on such flimsy evidence, not when, for a few cents more, you could buy a guide or a couple of native bearers, glad to carry your haversack on their heads and sing ennobling songs of the local terrain and the kingdom of the risen sun, a future conditional, Lord knows, no one gives up fresh meat for a share of weathered gingerbread, I don't care how many peppermint pinwheels you append, still, the faraway fact of the matter remains, and here's where I'd ask you to pay close attention, Johann, we're getting to the part where everything changes and yet stays the same, if I had a cross, here's where I'd stick it, and if I had a lollipop, here's where I'd lick it, because the smoke grew thick as glass then and smeared of mandarins, it made you think of little girls and other close imponderables, here's where the red car pulls up and the conductor calls for twos and threes, so we get on, very orderly, duly leaving behind the others, there's a tense moment when one of them tries to pass himself off for a second, but the conductor, a man with a remarkably large head, bald as the inside of a mouth, wound his watchstem once and sent the boy back to the front, and as I've got tooth and tongue, I spit and attest that once we got going, we never looked back, though there's more on that later, the red bus is longer than one expects, however comfortable, two men to a seat, two seats to a row, I lost count of the number of rows, they multiply so readily, though the seats are made of good green leather, stout as a boar's bladder, buttoned along the sides with small brass tacks, one could flip down a mahogany armrest if one liked, or take a small satin pillow with the words, *Kann er was* inscripted in rose, from under the seat in front of you and fold your arms across your chest and rest, while stewards, small men with smaller hands, walk the aisle, dispensing more packets of seeds, plain, salted, or with a jam doughnut, though if you ask politely, you can exchange them for a slice of Saure Nieren and some new potatoes, or a couple of cigarettes and little silver cups of buttermilk and beer, one of the boys had a flask of *Kirschwasser* and was passing it round to the delight of the others, who clapped him on the back and called him Padre, the bus bumps along, the road laid straight until we turn, revealing an accordion-type pleat in the middle of the bus, naturally dividing the men into them and us, and a fight broke out along these lines, whereupon it's decreed by the driver there will be no more fraternizing between rows, though we could, if we wanted, sing in rounds, and so we sing, the mass of us sang *Kumbayo*

and *Frère Jacques* and *Komm, Süsßer Tod* and as we start on *Row Row Row Your Boat*, a small cad splinters off and begins shooting dice out the window, it's a fool's game, we agree, for no one could see how they fell, but still they persist, declaring some winners and snatching up the script of others. As far as I can tell there's no pattern to it whatsoever, though the conductor seems to have a hand in it. Making off with more than one wristwatch, by this time the sun is sinking over the fields, which have become vineyards and rice-paddies, all in one, the cool abused earth silvered with fruit, the sky beautiful, purple-gray, portentous as a newborn's bruised eyelids, each of us agreed it was deep, some swore they also saw *pommes de terre* and *de Ruggieri*, they were suddenly that hungry, and as luck will have it, Cook brought out an enormous platter of bitty buns, tiny cinnamon biscuits smothered in orange icing, we fell upon them like first formers, and spent the next few minutes naming things. Spotted out the window, I came up with *block and tackle* and Carl put his finger on *chocolate*, Winfrey cornered *hope*, Black Jack got *horizon*, and the twins put their heads together and pronounced *stainless steel*, which everyone acknowledged could not be topped, besides and moreover, it was dawning on us that we were reaching a destination, for Freiburger began putting on his pack and he was normally the most oneirocritical of the men, so the rest of us followed suit, and as we did, some in the other sections begin praying, it started soft and scattershot, an *Ave* heaved heavenward here and there, a man murmuring *amen*, then the gunners take up crying *Kyrie Eleison*, which puts the second platoon into a frenzy of applause, *Sapiencia Dei Patris*, notes the Captain, *Potencia Dei Patris*, answers the sergeant-at-arms, they shake hands and salute the conductor, who pulled the silk bell-rope and announced "Agincourt," in such a comic way that we instantly felt better, one of the men puts on his iron cap so his longish hair juts out all round the underneath and he stood stock still and paraphrases, *Full of pe and made a' goog, We, a dowf an dowie brood, what cougher blocher caller meit, Full weary, efti couth weep, Perfay, mon wo and wreuch spreits, Sakbbit, sary, with glar gladderrit, hiddowus weir tramorts gorgeit, Our blaiknit hewmounds preif tha keek, Jakkis in sle an trowis siccarly, Soch bonni wichtis will na greet crammasy tyres for bairns unbelly'd, our douce lasses, maculait for-tiret, Gaww lads, brute for bale, Makaris brief our tayken tale*, whereupon young M'Naghten tossed his hat shouting, "A fag for those by God protected, Liberty's a scabby priest, seals for sirens were suspected, whisky spilt to tease the peace," and everyone took whatever coins they had on them and likewise threw them in the air, and whosoever got heads paled, thinking they are for sure doomed to the front and likewise and contrarily, them that tailed got into a lather, figuring they're destined for the rear, but the Captain holds up a telegram from HQ that countermanded this altogether, so heads would be chiefly assigned, no, Johnny, not posterior, that'd be pretty pat, don't you think, the old switcheroo of the sign, a Michelangelo hardly worth mentioning, the confusion absolute and thus easily abated, for if one had a mind, one could simply ride the white pendulum, side, that is, to side, the temporal transposition's logistically and pointedly useless, a practicum solely for the Manichæan world, a world favored by metaphor and the man in the street, no, the isolate fact of the matter is heads were sent west and tails headed east, save Freiburger, who'd had the luck of landing sideways and so was not immediately shot on the spot but rather, and you'll slap me for this, kissed on both cheeks and sent home, where he did not perish by the pistoled hand of a once-loving woman or incensed man, and similarly, where he did not grow gray surrounded by tow-topped tots with strawberry-kissed lips who called him Boompa as they fished lemon sours and licorice bits from his great coat pockets, but rather went on much as he had before, no more or no less, no better or no worse, no or, for that matter, at all, for Freiburger by nature lacked any tock by which to measure his tick, and thus by the time Freiburger unpetaled his bough, he had become a local river, reasonably deep, with a steady current, good for Sunday boating and Saturday fishing, claiming only a few luckless lives now and again, as luck would have it, I had a mind to head west, my understanding was our company was to guard or attack the donjon, which I'd not noticed, not before, but the fog had rolled in and my vision was constricted,

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