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MARECHERA

Black Struggle

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 African Writers Series

An H. E. B. Paperback

A winner of 'The Guardian' fiction prize

Black Sunlight

DAMBUDZO MARECHERA



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One

Through the open window. The fucking window, a slashing wind blows. Through the open window. Within this pale womb with its beard, a brutal story writhes. Night imprisoned in the room stayed with me all day long. Laughter's broken glass, through the fucking window. Is the view. The endless glittering view of gigantic humid trees shutting out the sun. A thin mould of history covers the walls. Covers the blood, flesh and bones. A black skin, thin and minute. Covers the darkness in the room. Through the open window, blows the slashing winds.

From a long ago, astonishment comes. From a once upon a time, that fucking window of fiction, astonishment comes. Blowing on his fingers. Thrust of pistonknees shoots through the giant, the humid, the fetid trees. Teeth clenched against the astonishing news.

'I tell you it was white from head to foot. It was bathing by the Blunt Rock Falls. It was human in form but I tell you it was white, so pale you could almost see the red flesh the white bones and the blue veins, see them through the white skin.'

The chief, as black as human beginnings, pondered. What new madness had struck this messenger? White men indeed! The chief removed his foot from my head.

He chuckled, 'White meat. We'll have white meat one of these days. White cunt. White arses. The thought like a seed burst into bloom. Erect between his sweating chunks of thighs.

I ventured to smile, laughing behind clenched teeth. At the chief's erection.

The sharp blade of his eye slashed through a hole in my soul. The verdict:

'Throw him down the pitlatrine!'

I threw myself at his feet, cringing.

'Not again, not again, not again, O great chief,' I begged.

He was contemplating his gigantic erection. He looked sly.

'Then suck my cock,' he said.

I visibly flinched. Shrank back to the waiting guards and pleaded:

'Throw me down the pitlatrine this minute.'

My crimes were not that great, but Christ! I had been his good court jester. I had made a joke from the back of my head. At his great expense. Since then it had been the pitlatrine. How dare you insult our most central traditions! he had thundered. I made the mistake of laughing at his unelemental thunder. Through the window into the pitlatrine. Christ!

'This minute!' I wailed.

The chief had risen from his throne of skulls. Human skulls.

'So. So you don't like our chief ornament, eh?'

I tried to think. It could cost me my head. My skull would be added to the ones that made his throne such a formidable ornament. I thought and thought.

'One man's ornament is another man's anathema,' I said.

It didn't sound quite right. Anathema. Anthem.

I crushed my face into crashing thought.

'Besides, you could save it for that white woman bathing at Blunt Rock Falls as the messenger said. It would give you an even greater ornament than you have now, if you see what I mean. Imagine it, O Chief, mating with a thing that cannot possibly exist and then eating it afterwards in cicada sauce. You are not a sodomite.'

'A what?'

'A sodomite.'

'What's that?'

'In the Little Oxford Dictionary a sodomite is one who has unnatural sexual intercourse with another of his own sex, especially between males. You can't be a great chief and a buggerer in the same breath. You're either one or the other.'

The chief abruptly sat down.

'And who do you say I am?' he asked.

I drew myself up:

'Our great chief.'

He oiled his eyes with orthodoxy and gazed at me. From head to foot.

'Where do you get all these words you come up with?' he asked.

You could bind a man with long ropes of words he did not understand. I said:

'My years of exile in the wide world, even across the seas to the land where these white people live. Their hair is long and shiny even between their thighs. Their eyes are green or blue and look like gems underneath an X-ray. Some of their women are of great beauty and if you have them from behind for the first time the sky will come down. It is a sweetness even you cannot imagine.'

'You have experience in it yourself?'

'Well,' I said. 'Yes and no.'

'Elaborate,' he demanded.

'I can't,' I said. That's what always went wrong.

His eyes scanned the court meaningfully. His thick fat fucking lips saying,

'I see. I see. Yes, I see,' he nodded at the guards.

'Hang him by his heels in the chicken yard. I will deal with him later.'

As I swung gently by my heels in the thick fat fucking breeze of sheer humidity, I had a clear view of the court and could see and hear all that went on there. So this is humankind. Swinging. Backwards and forwards. Swinging through history. These are my people. I am their people too. Crucified upside down by my heels. My Golgotha a chickenyard. Father! Father! Why the fucking shit did you conceive me? You have no meaning. I have no meaning. The meaning is in the swinging. And that is ridiculous. Absurd. Hal! That fucking bitch, my mother, why did you open up to receive him? After that annunciation, that lecherous gleam in his single glittering eye. Did you writhe and shake our history's shirt front? As now I grind my teething people in a cocoon. Swinging. Swinging in a cocoon of chickenshit. Europe was in my head, crammed together with Africa,

Asia and America. Squashed and jammed together in my dustbin head. There is no rubbish dump big enough to relieve me of my load. Swinging upside down, threatening to burst the thin roof of my brains. Those years of my travels. Years of innocence and experience. Motherfucking months of twiddling my thumbs with insecurity. In search of my true people. Yes, in search of my true people. But wherever I went I did not find people but caricatures of people who insisted on being taken seriously as people. Perhaps I was on the wrong planet.

In the wrong skin.

Sometimes.

And sometimes all the time. You know. In the wrong skin.

This black skin.

My thoughts swung gently like an uncertain breeze. Swung towards that unsuspecting female anthropologist who was bathing at Blunt Rock Falls. She had I knew a certain renown in her own country. This intrepid seeker after the ideal human society. Blanche Goodfather, that was her name. I had avidly read her books. On life among headhunters. Life among skinheads, screwballs, dossers, down and outs, tarts, the shithheads of skidrow. Life among cannibals. She was a moth fiercely attracted to the lights of the savage, the earthy, the primitive. And how she roamed the earth - how she too searched - ferreted out the few bits and pieces of authentic people reducing them to meticulous combinations of the English alphabet. Those books. Now she was calmly bathing at Blunt Rock Falls. Where the water was a translucent green and the rocks a savagely scarred mass of gnarled igneous columns. Her jeans and blouse and her rucksack in a loose pile underneath the aged branches of the *masasa*. Her tanned skin, that waterproof bronze sack, enclosed firm flesh, a strong skeleton, a luminous brain. And underneath the mass of sandy curls, her face peered out like a placid mouse underneath a haystack. I swung and swung oblivious of the chickens, the hens, the cocks that had gathered around my head poking in my hair for rare titbits. Would she recognize me after all these years. We had had only that single year at Oxford together, full of study and hugs and shit and that somnolent afternoon. . . .

On the mantelpiece fragrant sticks were burning. Their thin curls of air-sweetening smoke somnolently plucked upwards seeming to

pause contemplatively before the framed reprint of Bronzino's *An Allegory*. Blanche sat before the electric fire wearing nothing but her scholar's gown. Through the wide open curtains, thick handfuls of snow digressed slantwise against the windowpanes. The transparent lattices of that somnolent afternoon. I lay naked face down on the bed, my mind utterly blank, my body languorous, my feelings a sheer perplexity. The silence was even nastier than the experiments we had done on each other's bodies. The best had emerged from the lurid sunken depths and we had clawed, scratched, bit, drawn blood till our eyes had enflamed and frightened the dragon back into its lair in our bodies. And the distant bells of St Mary's had to clang the hour, letting loose upon the slate roofs and spires a peal of golden sparks.

Ah, somnolent afternoons. . .

Swinging upside down my hair white with chickenshit.

The flies from a respectful distance scanned every mouthful as did the skinny dog from next door. I was eating *sadz* and trying to make my one piece of meat last. I was reading Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. The sun was burning angrily straight above my head. I could see through the mud and tincan door, the vaguely etched figures eating and each making her piece of meat last as long as possible. From the other door, firmly shut, came the noise and din of bedsprings being punished again and again. Susan was in there with another client. We were eating the proceeds from her last but one client. With the food had come a deafness and none of us turned a hair when the man came out buttoning his flies and, clutching a quart of beer, staggered languorously down the dirt and gravel street. Susan came out tying her money-handkerchief into her bra. Her face was as blank as it was hard, made even more so by the plaited hair which was sharply drawn back from her forehead. I stared hard at *Miss Blandish*. As she crossed over my outstretched legs she said,

'You shouldn't read while you're eating. It's not good manners.'

'It was the only way to shut out the sound of the mattress,' I replied.

Her eyes were hard and small. They could have spat out contempt.

But she did not say it. She tossed a twenty-five cent coin into my lap.

I watched her stride after the man and I did not think these were real people.

I dunked my dirty plates into the large dish full of water. As I watched them sink and already begin to flake off the encrusted bits of sadza and congealed soup, the flies shot into the air and angrily contemplated suicidal dives to retrieve their lost lunch. They were fat and blackgreen with dark silver wings that vibrated faster than the eye could ever see. Their huge compound eyes glistened with the paranoia of black sunlight. I wiped the sweat from my brow with the greyish white vest which we used as a towel.

I wiped the chickenshit from my face with the back of my bound hands. The chief was sunk in thought. He wore nothing but a necklace made of human fingerbones. That grey grizzled head, the nonexistent eyebrows, the small sweaty eyes, the fat bulbous nose, the thick pendulous lips through which peeped a suggestion of small sharp but irregular teeth, and the three chins which bulged and drowned into the barrel chest which squatted on an elephantine pelvis with its massive thighs, forbidding buttocks - all this precariously supported by short thin legs on whose feet the smallest toes had been royally cut off. And everywhere tufts of hair sprouted out of the sweaty swamp of flesh. The fantastic physiognomy of my great chief suggested sudden and barbaric impulses, crude and insatiable appetites, dark and grim events. But he was, in his heyday, a mighty wrestler, a casanova, a fair and just man, given to sudden bursts of playfulness and hilarity. Now conscious of his old age, his loosening hold on reality, his frequently ineffective wars on the neighbouring chiefdoms and his declining virility, he had become an unpredictable tyrant. He did not know it but the world was closing in on him in the shape of white people, the first one of whom was Blanche Goodfather. Bathing nude in the tanned and glittering glory of her European tradition. The chief had good reason to be sunk in thought, even if it was the big meal of wild boar and cicada sauce which he was at that moment slowly beginning to digest. They had not yet fed me that day and the sight of my great chief in the satiated

splendour of his black sunlight reminded me of the sudden and huge meals which I would, after bouts of starvation, stuff greedily into my system in restaurants in Oxford, London, Bude, Lagos, New York, Singapore. Chopsticks, knives and forks, bare hands. My stomach had become a hardened veteran to all the kinds of food people, everywhere, ate. Sitting on the floor, sitting on a low table, reclining on cushions, standing up as though in readiness for flight out of Egypt. Eating out of plates, out of banana leaves, out of elephant leaves, out of wooden bowls, out of unnameable cauldrons. Eating. Wiping the chickenshit off my mouth. Out of tins, squeezing the last drop of juice from a piece of meat while the mattress is in uproar. Eating sadza and beans, sadza and sugar in jail. In boarding school, in college. Sadza, that supposed cornerstone of my authentic image. That icon of African greatness, my great chief, snoring in thought. Still erect. Dreaming of Blanche Goodfather...

From the depth of the stifling feathers I shriek a sneeze. The chickens scatter and squabble from a distance, looking at me askance. Gently O Lord but let creation swing. And I from my vantage point upside down record its dizzying sweetness. Blanche, Blanche Goodfather is the Tarzan to rescue me from my plight. Female Odysseus, male Penelope awaits you warding off suitors by the stratagem of weaving words. Tales, songs, poems, dramas, parables, ribaldry, bawdy and last but not least they shake out my thoughts by my heels.

Now the sweltering heat overpowers me. Its dank blasphemous sweetness hangs shimmering in the humid air. The whole wide clearing with its weird conglomerate of wooden huts thatched with leaves and the cheek by jowl doorways yawning low and craftily and the opaque bright blue haze that signifies the presence of a sky way up there, the whole mirage seems to shift and shimmer, to twist and turn until it becomes some long ago beastiality sharpening its claws, licking its fur, cleaning its jaws with toothbrushes made of hairy men. Then from behind the gigantic tree trunks that closely press against the settlement from all sides, from behind their fat greenglaring leaves and the thick tangles of vines and weird undergrowth, comes the startling roar of leopard. The harsh vibration, low, growly, thunders as though some distant void in man's affairs had burst in out of itself. The chickens scatter. The guards hold their

spears firmly and peer at the forest. The chief rolls his eyes sternly. The whole clearing is suddenly quiet, as still as a needle that listens to its own sharp point. High above, the bright blue sky has become more luminous. It hurts to look up at it. My heels hurt. I try to swing more gently, to attract no significant notice. The brutal gnashing throats of sound suddenly cease. I think of Blanche Goodfather, out there bathing nude by Blunt Rock Falls. The chief who is his own chief medicine man has taken out his bag, his Pandora's box, the one that deals with feral threats. He consults the bones on the ground before the throne. The grizzled frame of head seems to squeeze the facial muscles into an inscrutable mask hewn out of black wood. The drummer at his side, beats a rapid tattoo on the drum clenched between his knees. The chief begins to chant. The rapid magical gibberish is firmly underlined by the rapid enfilade of the drum. The courtiers, as though magnetized, draw near. Their single distorted voice breaks out in refrain:

*Moon and stars
Cannot resolve
The abyss.*

The total effect was of the centrifugal concerto wrought in the soul by a baby's first sheer breath. Listening, I had become as rigid as a rod. No longer swaying like my own destiny's pendulum. There is providence in the fall of a sparrow. . . . Blanche Goodfather in a T-shirt labelled BG was fighting for her life right in the middle of a ravenous scrum. And she was the ball though she did not know it. I kicked it hard, harder, hardest. I kicked it even harder than that. I landed in a heap. THUMP. The chickens did not even squawk. The drums, the gibberish, the insistent refrain, their total sound had solidly filled every nook and cranny of that clearing. As I disappeared into the jungle, a shout screeched after me. I was out of sight. At my heels was this sudden storm of stomping feet. A spear greased my right forearm. I gritted my teeth. So much for the real people. My long ago stint as an athlete in the Commonwealth Games in Cairo was suddenly an asset.

The history of the Runner flashed through my head. The escapee. The scapegoat. The fiery bundle of fur streaking through the ripe

fields of wheat. There is always somebody on the run. From weird judges, fucking pigs, filthy neighbours, from the shit inland revenue, the brutal Special Branch, from the Man in the camouflage uniform, from the Man behind the riot shield, from the scandalized husband, the embittered mistress, from the ugly face of tradition, the back of a bus face of slogans. It flashed right through me, the history of the Runner. Another spear nicked my hip. Fucking Allah! And there was Hitler at the Olympic Games turning his backside on our finest athlete. You do not wait for the starter's gun. The mere presence of the Ku-Klux-Klan in the neighbourhood is enough. Or the National Front. The mere presence of the fucking pigs is enough to catapult one to the other side of the earth. Motherfucking Buddha! I've spent my life running from one bit of earth to another. Carrying my smashed peace of mind into the oddest gangs of peoples. Take this one for instance. I bring them music and laughter and poetry and they throw me into a pithairine. By now Blanche can already smell my inglorious flight, covered in humankind, chickenshit and prickling all over with ghastly spears. Stanley meets Mutesa. Blanche Goodfather I presume. I am a bit of alright, Blanche, just a slight case of black wasps I trod on. You know. A nip into the pool will quickly restore me to my old self. Fucking military arse! Another spear just shaved off my right sideboard. The persistent bastards. I'm only a fucking court jester, Chief, not a dissident like Sakharov. Shit. The spears are still flying. I wonder if Walter Mitty ever daydreamed anything like this? There are more immediate things in the world than all my travel and Oxford degree. As I fought through a stubborn tangle of ropelike undergrowth, getting scratched, gouged, gagged, entangled, I thought of Sparta and Athens and how the runner got through. I fought thicker and thicker into the mass of thorny vines. I heard running feet. They seemed to come from every side. It was black. I simply stood perfectly still right in the middle of that now - I hoped - blessed hideous undergrowth. They seemed to pass by, those footsteps. I willed my heart to cease its howling beat. I willed my heart of darkness to stop wheezing horror - horror. It was too quiet. I did not dare move a muscle. It was hot and sick and thorny. I stifled the scream as I realized it was not thorns, sharp thorns, biting me but ants, swarms of them and the whole thicket was crawling with them. I tried to

protect my private parts but it was too late. They were crawling all over me. Biting. Eating. Crawling away with little pieces of me held in their jaws. I burst out of the burning bush, leaving a gigantic yell about to reverberate at the heart of the entangled vines.

'There he goes!'

The yell seemed to explode from all directions. I was the pieces of its shrapnel flying lethally everywhere at once. My head was one huge madness showering rubble in their faces shouting hoarsely, tigerishly:

'We are all brothers! WE ARE ALL BROTHERS.'

Everywhere I looked a flying spear met my sudden glance. I dodged spears like a dancer in a mad dream. Dodged. Grappled with a naked oily painted body. Fucked through. Sideways. My fist stinging from the impact of his weaving jaw. The open forest lay before me. I willed my heels to pluck me through. Jammed into ghostly tree trunks. Crashed through the fat dank foliage. Suddenly, there was no ground underneath. Rolling hideously. Falling. The sky spinning dewdrops, thousands of them, spinning sideways until flat on my back the impact of its vast luminosity concussed me into silence. I lay still. Stunned. Hearing the Falls roar.

In the wrong place.

Some places are always the wrong place.

Even though the timing is right.

Were they real, these people as I had thought? My last thought before I passed out was,

'Marc'

'Cari'

'Cat'

'URES'

It was a long once-upon-a-time when I thought 'This is unreal' and I realized I was once more back in the so-called real world. She had made a fire. I could smell coffee. I could smell something even more maddening. Cigarettes.

'Blanche, a cigarette. Quick.'

She lit it and threw it into my face. I sucked greedily.

And guffawed.

'He wanted me to suck his cock,' I explained.

She gritted her small even teeth. The tiny enamel sound seemed to underline the sudden and rapid twilight dappling the overhead sky with overwhelming violet hues. I shivered dizzily. This was a real cigarette. Camels, too. And that over there is Blanche Goodfather looking like a pearl cast before swine. Feeling at home in the pig-mush. The snorting muzzles that sniffed and grunted at her enquiringly, and turned her over to see what she was like underneath. A scorpion that used its fatal sting sparingly. Regretfully I stubbed out the spent cigarette. I was dressed in my own clothes. My own rucksack and the indestructible bag that contained my cameras were right there by my side.

'I bargained with them,' she said.

'Bargained with that bag of shit! How?'

She looked at her watch. It was ticking merrily as it had always done that year in Oxford. She began to wind it up.

'There are ways,' she said.

I flinched.

'How many of them?'

'Twelve of them.'

'You took precautions, of course.'

She smiled, giving her watch a last wristflicker of a windup.

'I always have my coil. Besides I convinced them that it would be even more pleasurable for them to use my cartons of Durex.'

'Some convincing!'

'As I said, there are ways.'

She said it with a toss of the head to dismiss the whole subject.

She went on:

'I met some of your strange acquaintances. Susan said you would make me bleed the way you screw like a circular saw. She wants me to let her know what I think about it. Your wife...'

She paused, face screwed up, remembering. She rummaged in her rucksack and brought out a flask.

'How's she? How's Marie?'

It had been a very long time since I had been able to send her any messages.

Blanche Goodfather raised her eyebrows, quizzically. And gave me the flask.

'She sent you this. It's whisky. Thought you might need it when you hear the news.'

Alcohol! I was already taking a deep gulp when I choked and demanded:

'What news?'

'Marie . . . she's all right. But the baby, it died only hours after its birth. She said to tell you not to worry. And that she's sorry it happened again. I'm sorry, too.'

I threw a twig onto the fire. The flames started up. The red embers crackled, glittered. I stared into them remembering the world that was waiting for me out there. Marie - it could not have happened again. But it had happened. I began to laugh.

'And she sends me whisky.'

And news of another dead baby, another dead-end possibility.

I drank the raw whisky, letting it roll around my mouth and slowly burn its way down into my innermost soulless gut. Poor blind Marie. I passed the bottle to Blanche.

'Do you want to hear the rest?'

I nodded too grimly. I had not drunk a drop of good neat whisky for months, years out here with my cameras and plans.

'Precision has been banned. The editor tried to defy the ruling and is now cooling his heels in jail. Susan is on the run. Chris is in a madhouse. He talks of nothing but excretion. Katherine has gone underground. Her husband the doctor died of alcoholic poisoning a few months ago. I understand he kept asking for you to give him a bit of money for a drink and died as it were dying for a drink. Shit, I need one myself.'

I watched her drink. Thinking of Joe, once a great doctor, now as it were a permanent fixture of skidrow. The moon, big and round, rolled into view with a stony enchantment.

'What about Stephen? Is he still going on with his experiment in dying?'

She nodded.

She rummaged once again in her rucksack. She found it. I could only gape.

It was a fat roll of pound notes. I turned it over and over in my hands. It was real.

She explained:

'It represents all the backpayments *Precision* owes you since you came out here. I brought all the magazines in which your articles appeared.'

She took a thick bundle out of that unfathomable rucksack. I scattered more dry twigs onto the fire. Afterwards I could only look at her and reach out for the flask and sip it slowly and thankfully. All the articles and photographs I had so precariously sent back, had reached the magazine. I had not hoped for such a miracle. Suddenly the moonlit night glimmered with distant but shining stars.

Later when we had talked and shared the last of the whisky and the furious heat of once again meeting like this had devoured the desire out of our limbs and she slept in her sleeping bag with her rifle by her side, I cradled my second-hand but lethal shotgun in my arms and sinking back against my rucksack watched the fire flickering vividly against the clear and smooth uproar of the Falls in that steep and dark valley and, for the first time since that long ago, allowed myself the luxury of thinking clearly and minutely about the people and the things I had left behind and was now returning to. Blanche would carry on here what needed to be done and more professionally, too. Back there the fiery and revolutionary fervour had been, she said, stamped out ruthlessly. She had given me a long list of those killed behind the barricades, those summarily executed, those detained, those who had escaped into yet another soul-destroying exile. The military now ruled. The doctors could still do nothing about Marie's eyes. I would return and I would still be only a voice and snatches of sound to her. The crudely organized opposition, driven underground would perhaps emerge sometime out of their basements, ratholes, caves. The capture of Devil's End probably scattered them far and wide. Was there a difference between the chief on his skull-carpeted throne and the general who even now had grappled all power to himself in our new and twentieth-century image? In either I can only perform as chronicler, subversive jester and teller of tales. I had money but no job to return to unless another disguised *Precision* emerged out of the shambles. And Susan, with a price on her head, flitting from place to place. At least she knew she could use my house and Marie would not see anything but only hear the friendly impulsive impetuous voice that was Susan. Then there is Katherine, grieving for Joe and hiding out with the police always

only a step behind. And that's the world I am going back to. And she sends me whisky. . . .

But like everything else that hides behind a poetic attitude, I had to come out bloody and dirty. I was washed, ironed, folded up, and fondled. I was as tiny as a spider at the wrong end of a telescope. My voice was the biggest thing about me. It still is. But I used my voice sparingly; everything was too huge to express. All those legs and all those arms constantly walking and doing things. It struck me I had come into the wrong world. But it was too late to do anything about it. Except to escape at the earliest possible moment. There was this woman who fondled me with tears in her eyes. There was this man who hung about as silent as a gunshot. They were my parents. He would pull the trigger and her eyes would smart and burst. The echo played a rapid tattoo on the windowpanes. I would hear the snarl of a train. I would hear another world raging inside my skull as though at any moment I would spin like a silver top and disappear out of my head. It was a disease, one they thought was fatal. But I knew what I had to do. At that time I always knew what I had to do besides just biding my time. He pulled the trigger several times one night and she like a cyclone wrung all the silence from me. I howled. Howled like a sinister symphony at full blast. I used to write like that. When, finally, he silenced me with the back of his hand and she saw red and there was all this blood splashing about I knew, quite definitely, that I had somehow entered the wrong room, come into the wrong world. I had to escape. I have to escape. The shrill whine tore through my ears and deposited three policemen who froze the bright picture. The man was carried out of my life.

They wiped me and greased me until I was smart. They were two hairy hands on each side of a huge bearded face that had a permanent roughness ingrained in the skin. It was my uncle. He read a great big book which had pictures of crucifixions in it. He read it to make me sleep. His voice had a cheerful but jagged edge to it. It gnawed at the silence like a dog crunching a bone dropping splashes of marrow everywhere. It drove all thought of sleep out of my head, and so he would go on reading to me throughout the night to make me sleep. In the morning, when he finally closed the big book and yawning terribly, got up from the hard chair, he would stare at me fixedly as though trying to hammer a nail into stone. He slammed the front

door and my teeth and I watched him going to work staggering through the neat wooden gate and tottering blindly into the road where the car found him. The amount of blood that shrieked out left a large stain on the asphalt. I closed the window and envied him. There were heavy footsteps in my head coming towards my door. It was my bowels. I had soiled myself. I went into the bathroom and washed myself for the first time. In the kitchen we had run out of everything except seven jars of jam. The uproar in the street went on for a long time. I finished the last jar. The sky was like a boulder on my head. They found me fast asleep in the doghouse at the back.

The lips were thin like threats. She was kneading the lobe of her ear and looking at me as though I was something unidentified on the radar. Her stiff cotton blouse and her brown pleated skirt and the neat highheels and the meagre but severe lines that scratched across her forehead were my picture of her. It was not to be the only picture. Many times I caught her looking at me like that. She was my uncle's wife. It rained every time she raised her small head and looked at me. Rained inside me. I detest getting wet. But she did it several times each day. I was drenched to the toes. I would go out into the garden and play with the dog and shriek with gloomy laughter and suddenly the rain would come. How could I shelter from my own rain? It was a rain not of my world and so I could not deal with it. And she knitted it day after day, knitted it my size and made me put it on until the sun could not penetrate to where I was. I see her in my pictures when I try to describe what she was. She is sitting on an old log eating a sausage and her mouth falls to pieces and she spits out a human thumb. But I smoke cigarettes. Behind her, the sun is going out fighting with all its rays. We are sitting in the dining-room and she is cutting a fat round loaf of bread. Absently, she puts a slice onto my plate. I tear it apart with my fingers, gently. A human ear drops out. Her look cuts her finger on the breadknife and the rain seethes. Crests of foam splashed onto the wet sand. In her black swimsuit, she is on her back in that other world which sunglasses create. I am looking down at her. I am thin and skinny, too tall for my age. She is in there in that other world and like a stone skimming across the surface of a river her own life skims over me. It did not rain that day, not even once. I could not scrape my eyes away from her surface.

It bounded back. I caught it and at once flung it again at the wall. It bounded back. I did not move. It hit me on the right cheek. I retrieved it from the grass and hurled it at the wall. As it shot back, I turned the other cheek. I did not flinch. The blood messed up my handkerchief.

Two

‘One! Two! Three! Four! . . . Eleven! Twelve! Go back to your seat!’

I was hot with resentment and pain. So this was school. From all sides my head was being jammed with facts. With ideas. I could see through my window across the yard and across the tarred road into a fenced lawn in front of a complex of light grey buildings. The sun gleamed on the roofs and bonnets of the cars in the parking lot. A few crows squawked on the roofs, swivelling their black heads knowingly as though about to refute time. On the lawn, however, were these prisoners dressed in khaki. Over them stood an armed guard who also carried a rawhide whip. The prisoners were weeding the lawn with an intentness that made getting those weeds out the most significant thing in the whole universe. It was so hot the very lid of the sky seemed to be melting. My backside hurt. The minutes ticking by slowly and the book open at my elbow, and the smudged inkwell, and the heat which every second shot through the crowded room, they were a faded picture from a faded planet on which I found myself.

I kicked it back hard. The few minutes of the recess seemed to race past me. I ducked my head and it shot by, grazing my cheek. I ran after it, dodging replicas of myself. I stubbed my toe and fell. There was blood on my elbows, and this boy whose face was scarred all over with laughter. I looked hard at him, drew in my head, and rained on him with fury. There were all these hands and legs kicking and

clawing us apart. It was a whirlwind. The bell rang just as his knuckles found my right eye. I was alone.

I made it just in time. When the teacher came in he spread across the blackboard a large map of the whole world. There was nothing more than mountains and oceans and rivers and cities and villages and some islands. Facts.

Hours later, my head had become all the things on the map and it was days before I could scrub them out and let the dirty water gurgie out of the sink. I towelled myself vigorously. When I came out she did not look up and I was grateful. She was knitting. I took the dog out for a walk. There were many soldiers in the streets. Their guns were the scariest thing. They stood at every street corner and in every hollow doorway. I bought a sketch pad and charcoal pencils. When we got back home she was in the kitchen cooking. There were voices in the dining-room. It was a blind girl in a pink dress and a boy my age wearing a jacket and tie. Marie and Stephen. They had come to stay with us as their home and parents had been bombed. I liked them, I decided, especially Marie because she was blind and yet wore a pink dress that reached down to her knees. I could not think what to show her. All I had were things she would have to see for herself to understand. She is judging me by my voice, I thought eerily. I was describing my drawings to her out in the back garden but they were drawings which cannot be described unless one wanted to feel sick about it all. She had a smooth oval face, a wide full-lipped mouth, a hesitant upturned nose, and eyes - eyes which could not see. She was small and plump and chewed her underlip most of the time. I drew pictures of her while we talked. She did not talk much. Perhaps it was a waste of time. It always is anyway. A waste of life. What she did was sing when she thought she was alone. But her tears then would spoil it for me because there is a hardness about solitary feelings dropping down someone else's cheek. I drew her like that many times but only once managed to catch the elusive outline of those glittering drops. I tore it up. It was too menacing. The dog hated Stephen. It bared its fangs whenever he wandered too near it. Stephen was neat and well-scrubbed; he hated dirt and hated nastiness and hated disorder and hated any mention of feelings. His face was square and grown up and the expressions which flickered across it always made him look like the back of something unendurable. He

was, however, when in the mood, open and comical and clownish but with a carefulness that spoiled whatever effect he was trying to elicit. He read a lot, as I did, but he read encyclopaedias, manuals, factual matter whereas I rigidly stuck to all kinds of fiction. There were still-lives of evenings when we all sat in the sitting-room, the fire smirking low in the grate, the long curtains rustling furtively, and my aunt in her basket chair knitting with a languorous wistful silence. Now and then a snore rumbled from the dog that was sleeping on the mat. I sat on a cushion on the floor close to the bookcase sketching rapidly the figure of Marie suckling her underlip. She had stretched out on the carpet and supported her head with her fists. Occasionally we heard firing but it may as well have been on the moon. Stephen lay on his side on the wide armchair reading a manual about tractors and their maintenance. But it was not always like this. There would come as if from some distant malignant world, hateful moods, awful silences, sudden outbursts. Aunt would suddenly begin to talk to herself in the kitchen. Stephen would silently stalk each room bursting the innards out of insects that crossed his path. Marie would simply, unaccountably, scream as though her throat were being slowly cut. I - I would rain. This could go on for days. The dog would refuse to come anywhere near all of us; it would refuse its food; and at nightfall would cast into orbit a sorrowful howl soon echoed by other canine beings. The very house itself would look and feel and smell morose and miserable. I would keep to my room and savagely draw again and again my parents and my uncle. They were gruesome drawings and death lurked in each of them. I would sneak up to Marie and yell suddenly in her ear. I hated her for being blind because her blindness made her safe from the things I was not safe from. I hated her for judging me by my voice and for always probing me with her fingers making something catch in my throat. The whole house then would, with the lives in it, shrill like a weird concerto. It would emit odours that reeked of fetid and sickly sweet metaphors. And I drew them all through my nostrils at the point of my charcoal. I kicked them without missing even one.

It was as if the foot was specially made to kick a football, and the buttocks to be caned, and the head to have the skull drilled with facts. The uproar of the school cheering us on seemed to confirm this. Our team seemed to be the best every time we played. This was

only because we were not sparing in all the viciousness and dirty play that a referee cannot see. I was the goalkeeper, a rather safe thing except when there was a pile-up and I got kicked in the face. My long arms and long legs made goalkeeping easy. The only problem was that my sight was going; I could no longer see as clearly as I used to. I welcomed this. What there was to see was not what I wanted to see. I kicked it back hard and jogged on the same spot in front of the goal. Stephen trampled what he saw to a stop and looked round him. He waltzed with it. He jived it this way. He twisted it that way. Moving forward all the time. He scooped it, tangoed it round a dizzied attacker, and lined up for a shot. The whistle shrilled. The game was over. Their goalkeeper wrung the tips of his fingers which had been singed by Stephen's shot. From all sides, the school poured onto the field shouting and cheering and roaring and thumping shoulders. As the hot water hissed over me and the steam plunged all around the naked and half-naked figures in the room, I wondered about Marie who could not see this.

'This?'

But Stephen had lost interest. His eyes were sort of glazed over. That meant he was thinking. Probably about tractors. Or Hittites.

I finished my homework and sought out Marie. She was alone in the sitting-room playing the ukelele. I stood in the doorway. Listening. She had on an ankle-length rough cotton dress that looked like a poncho. Now and then she sang or rather whispered snatches of a song I had once heard her sing. I could never quite catch the words; but on her lips whatever those words were had been transformed into an inner torment that trembled softly against the long curtains and made me want to withdraw. But I did not. I stayed and listened and she was singing suddenly of a world which was not there but of which I had had the wildest intimations. I realized that I was listening to the inside of my own madness. It made me step into the room. At once she stopped singing, but her fingers still tinkled out restless notes from the ukelele. At last she stopped even that. Her head was angled as if she expected a blow. Suddenly it was all foolishness. It made my voice harsh.

'It's cold in here.'

She arched her shoulders and nodded. Her hands lay uselessly in

her lap. Her head still hung as though from a noose. I knelt before the fireplace. I scooped the mounds of ash into the pan. I set the small chopped up logs with pieces of torn planks and rolled up newspapers. When the flames busily spread and the wood was well lit I gently began to add the rough pieces of coal. She had not said a single word.

I had shut out the voice of the teacher and the rustle of pages and the scraping of the note-taking pens. The prisoners were once again on the lawn combing it for invisible weeds. They were all carefully crouched over, their hands flickering busily and earnestly. The armed guard was flexing his whip and striking terrifying attitudes. His dark glasses gleamed like the sinister emblems of a powerful world. What did it mean that this was my hometown, my country, my continent, my planet, my universe? It could mean everything. It could mean nothing. I was in it. I was it. This irrepressible heat of a living thing growing just as the weeds grew. A truckload of soldiers roared past. All their intentions were left hanging like dust over the asphalt long after they had gone. They were there in the classroom with us, marshalling facts, categorizing, reciting, and absorbing the knowledge handed down through the ages. All these meanings that had a hard and unyielding face! How did one escape? In a rain of bullets? Or seeing red everywhere until the straitjacket came?

Marie had not said a single word. Words not said were enclosing me in their calcium skeleton. It was a good fire, burning my reason. Stephen poked his head round the door and beckoned to me. We went to his room. Until my aunt called us down we pored over manuals about guns and explosives. I could hear Marie singing and playing the ukelele. I could hear my aunt banging about in the kitchen. I could hear the build-up of trucks outside and the deep throaty rumble of the armoured cars as they picked their way through the congested streets. From his window Stephen pointed out all the different military uniforms and vehicles and as I listened to his running commentary I saw turning into our street derelict trucks that were full of corpses piled on top of each other. And Marie's song rang out thin and clear above the muted metallic notes of the ukelele. After dinner, my aunt went out, and Stephen went back to his manuals. I was alone with Marie again and the fire was

low, scarcely glowing. There was a strange quickness in her face. She said,

'I can smell dead things.'

It was the dead in the trucks out in the streets. But I was pleased because for the first time she had been the first to speak.

Three

I could only note how heavy my eyelids grew. A nightmare in low key. That was how the days unfolded, slowly but surely, with a steady bright light behind their skin. I drank it in one gulp. The burden on my eyelids lifted. The chair was iron, the conversation dead. Marie looked scared and brave; she was here, right here in the present, and yet far away. As it were a distant present. The dead thing that had been born out of her, her baby, had long since been incinerated. Like time.

In the cellar in High Street, she gripped my thoughts and dragged me onto the dance floor where we could not tire ourselves that night or every other night. If danced to the bitter core how endless this could be, this grieving, this forgetting. The music was hushed, full of the dry wash of metallic brushes, thin and brittle interruptions of cymbals. It atomized the emotions, and rearranged them in strange haunting patterns. The new Marie was a complete stranger, arranging and rearranging herself around me. Day after day. Now I am trying to arrange her for you.

Stephen had turned solemn and abruptly old. Each day for him was an experiment in dying. At college he had burnt as it were in a crucible the soft outer covering of his heart. Coldly and deliberately. Now there he was, a streak of grey from the crown to the back of the neck, wearing deep blue, and spreading himself over Patricia. Aggressively oozing sex. As he always did after his monthly visit to my aunt's grave. I had gone with him once. He had sat on her tombstone and after silently gazing at the endless stream of cars roaring past he had lit his pipe and said,

'She was a good woman.'

I did not contradict him. There were a lot of things I could have said. About her and him and the nightgown. About her and him and the glass paperweight. About her and him and the fights. But what was the use. He had known her. But in a way utterly different from how I had known her. He had known her. And I was still obviously in this world. As he was not. Marie had seen nothing but understood. I said,

'I understand.'

But he straightened up and knocked his pipe out on the tombstone and said,

'Did you?'

Patricia drove us back, his hand underneath her skirts. I could see what he saw in her. And every man within groping distance could see it too. I liked her for the sheer animality and the ruthlessly straightforward way in which she dealt with everything. But it was a straightforwardness that was off side, oblique. She seemed to be all that Marie was not. But they were like a matchstick and a matchbox; to scratch them against each other always worked. Except on certain occasions.

'Did you?'

I hesitated.

'Answer me. Did you?'

I said, 'Yes.'

She visibly shrank.

'You mean ...'

I took a step forward. Marie stepped back. Out of reach.

'You actually ...'

'There were no feelings involved, Marie. She was there and doing things to me. Only afterwards did I think.'

'Think about her?'

'No. About you.'

My hands were still shaking. I poured a big drink. She just watched me. Those blind eyes.

'Yes?'

'And me.'

'Did you get the parsley?'

'Shit. I forgot.'

'And you made decisions.'

'Yes, Marie. To come back.'

'To what? Me?'

'You.'

'Stephen knows.'

'Yes. He was there.'

I paused. My small left toe hurt. I said,

'You were there, too, Marie.'

'You don't have to remind me.'

I could still hear the battlefield noises of the party. It had been — cruel.

'You and Stephen ...'

'That's different. He's my brother.'

'But ...'

'I don't want to hear it!'

The scream hung over our dinner like an axe over frozen ice.

'The salt,' she said. 'The salt, please.'

I passed the salt.

What anniversary was it? The ukelele stood on the mahogany desk at the far end of the room where I worked when I was home. Fresh-cut roses offered their singular fragrance to the beat of the hour.

We ate in silence.

She wiped her mouth with the corner of her napkin. Decisively. I tried to forestall her.

'Look, Marie ...'

'You forget, I'm blind. Besides, there is nowhere to look.'

Now my whole body ached. It had to be done.

I stood up.

'You're not a child any more, Marie.'

The table and the dinner things crashed onto the floor. I crushed her to me. She shouted.

'You can't make me not go to him! You can't!'

It was a silent vicious struggle. Afterwards I could not believe it.

When Stephen arrived, we were down to the last bottle, dancing slowly round the room in pink paper hats. He looked at her. I shook my head.

'She's not coming this time, Steve.'

'Who says?'

'I says, brother Stephen,' Marie said.

The silence slammed the door after he had ravenously left. The explosion of his car shooting away reminded me of the great big book and my uncle eternally attempting to read me to sleep.

'Why this time?'

'What?'

'You never fought me before.'

'I never want to again.'

There were hisses in the kitchen. It was the coffee boiling over.

Four

From the bedroom I could hear the riot still going on. Sporadic gunfire shattered the uneasy night. I was tired. Marie's bunched-up body felt pitifully mortal. Gently I got in beside her and lit a cigarette and put out the light. I had dumped the camera on my desk in the dining-room. They were going to be my best work, those pictures. I could feel it. I was tired, dead tired. I had been up since the early hours of the morning when the first bomb went off. It had been followed by a series of explosions in different parts of the town. All of a sudden a screaming hungry horde was pouring through the streets, smashing windows and looting and attacking any sign of authority whether human or inanimate. It was the blow the whole town had tensed up for, long ago. I had rushed out, been swept along with the rush of stampeding bodies and had, with them dodged the soldiers' bullets, escaping unhurt more by sheer luck than ferocious cunning. I had taken a lot of pictures. The kind I had always wanted to take — and not just for paying the rent. These were good. I knew it. I would send them to *Precision*, a weekly edited by a friend of Stephen. I had done some work for them before but this was going to blow their minds. I stubbed out the cigarette.

Marie was still asleep when I woke up. The dim light of early morning was spreading across the sky. I sensed it the moment I stepped out and closed the front door. The menace. I drove carefully, slowly. There were bodies on the pavement and on the roads. Sometimes I had to get out and drag them off the road. One of them was Nick, Patricia's brother. He had been an intense and earnest young man who took everything seriously. That was a mistake. But I

liked him. We had long and ponderous conversations about everything under the sun. He was very fond of Patricia who however despised him for some obscure and never identified passion. When I parked the car and rang the bell it was Patricia herself who answered. Her eyes were as dry as diamonds when I told her. Stephen came in buttoning his flies and chewing his words carefully. It would be dangerous to have a subversive corpse that was related to one. Best to leave Nick where he was. Maybe he would never be identified. After all he was always missing, going away without a word for months on end. Patricia agreed. I wonder sometimes whether Nick is still lying there in the gutter by the phone booth in Third Avenue, as serious as everything was to him. I like to think that he is still there, dead but there, as if he was a line from his own poetry. A paragraph from his own shrieking pamphlets. A hollowly ringing sound from the crypt of his own fictions. Stephen phoned later to say *Precision* would devote the whole of that week's edition to the anarling event of the riot and that my pictures were 'stunning'. I cashed the cheque and bought Marie a braille typewriter. The jails were full. There were executions. Nick was never identified and was buried as an unknown. As he had once jokingly described himself to me. It was easy to grieve for him without actually thinking about him. Just as it was easy to divorce one's feelings from the object of their attention. Stephen called this 'the basic experiment'.

I closed the huge doors behind me and walked softly towards the altar. I was in the opium of the people. The huge cross dangled from chains fixed to the roof. I stood looking at the crucified Christ. He looked like He needed a stiff drink. He looked as if He had just had a woman from behind. He looked like He had not been to the toilet for two thousand years. He looked like I felt. That was the connection. That was what made Him big, this mirroring quality that made your right hand a left hand and your sins the path out of themselves. He hung there like one in dire need of a cigarette. Not just passive, but alive so, like a picture out of a men's magazine, explicitly showing all His wounds and orifices with an air of spirited invitation. In these terms Nick had described Him to me, described Him as one describes a thorn in one's flesh, or the spreading disease between one's thighs.

It was so quiet in there I could hear my thoughts arranging themselves all over His body. Why had I come? I always came to watch Him whenever the soullessness was too much for me. It always ended with the same humiliated ridiculousness of becoming aware that I was staring at a man-made statue expecting a miracle to take place. I had once brought Marie here but she had taken only a few steps towards the altar when she shivered violently and vomited. Afterwards when she asked what kind of place it was I had taken her into I could not pronounce the word 'church' so I said,

'Some kind of hall.'

'What goes on in there?'

'Singing and praising.'

Her face changed. She said, wonderingly,

'I used to sing, remember?'

I remembered. I remembered too the day and hour she had stopped singing - the day she had spoken to me without waiting to be spoken to. My aunt had found us and raised hell.

'You sang beautifully, Marie. You should sing again. For me. I want you to very much. I have wanted you to do so all these years.'

I realized suddenly that I did not want her to sing, not ever. That silver string had long since been broken. Besides her voice had changed for the worse. There were only the memories of that dreadful, that sweet house. When had the rain stopped? That was when Stephen had begun to go to her room and she to go to his room. I had not understood until the incident of the underpants. After that, it did not rain. I had slunk about under the skirts of the sky seeing indecencies everywhere.

I looked up at Him who hung from the roof and wondered. I wanted very much to believe but because I wanted to I could not. I could never believe in my own wants. It had to be a miracle, something totally from the outside of myself. But, with miracles, that was impossible. It was from the other side which was impossible for me. The very clothes on my back were made out of useless deaths, wasted lives, unbelievably. To refute time so fully that I could dangle from white-hot chains fixed to the sky was what always stared me in the eye. To eat and to drink that precious moment of refutation. To prolong it with praises and songs. To whip its back. To kick it in the teeth. To cherish again and again the bitter recon-

ciliations. The avid embrace of it. To photograph it and like a cough, from one unseen passing by, listen long and longingly. To drive it over a cliff. To kiss it. But this narcissism. This pungent audible velvet glorification was no more than a childish resort to desperate vision. Seeking out in repeated contemplation the impossible arcadia of a humane and visible world. To have been out of it for so long and to only see it in dreams that come blackening at the edges, this was hell. The enticing impossibility was itself the sharp and jagged blade that like time prodded my back and I took with each day the fateful step towards the pit. Such, such is the necessary melodrama until from within the world bursts out.

There was a sharp crack. With a cry I stepped back. The heavy cross crashed almost at my feet, the flying chain nicking my cheek. The broken thing smoked with plaster and dust. I stared.

Five

I stood at the window in Professor Webb's office taking pictures of the students' demonstration. There were about five hundred of them. They had surrounded the Administration building. They were deadly quiet. You could literally have heard a pin drop. Behind them on all sides were the soldiers. And behind the soldiers were spectators who before the day was over would regret ever having come out to watch. The soldiers were in a nasty mood. They wanted to teach almost everyone a 'lesson'. I could see Webb remonstrating with one of their officers. A moment later - I was recording everything - the officer struck Webb down and trampled him underfoot. Webb grabbed his foot and brought him down. Some soldiers stepped forward but the officer shouted something. The next moment they were fighting earnestly, intently. Webb was practically an old man but he fought like one possessed. Twice the officer fell. There was blood on both men's faces. But soon Webb tired. The officer hit him again and again. Webb fell and lay still. The soldiers meanwhile were grimly pressing the students against the sides of the building. The dog handlers seemed about ready to let loose their charges. One student hurled a rock at the wide windows of the building. As it smashed through, showers of stones shattered into the building. The soldiers struck. I saw Webb struggling to get up and looking around wildly. His spectacles were probably smashed. Rifle butts were being used as clubs. The dogs were biting their way through. A shot rang out. A thin hysterical cry shrieked,

'They've shot Leslie! They've shot Leslie!'

Everywhere, the battle for an instant paused. Then, rage, yells, a series of shots, unbelieving screams. Through the camera lens the whole thing writhed like a jackal biting through its own trapped leg.

I had the camera on my right shoulder. I felt absolutely nothing. I had actually become the camera itself, shooting the human spectacle before me. I saw a student break out of the livid mess and run towards the now fleeing spectators. A soldier jumped from behind a parked armoured car and aimed an ugly looking gun at her. An arrow of flame shot into the student's back. In an instant, she was a walking living torch. There were running figures everywhere. Isolated fights. Here and there a bunch of students backing down a trapped soldier. And the rapid starbursts of gunfire. Webb had scrambled to his feet. He was waving a bit of paper over his head. And then, incredibly, I saw Marie, her hands waving wildly above her head and her mouth open, though I could not hear the scream. I do not know how long it took to register in my mind that Marie was out there. The camera hanging down from my neck hit me again and again as I jumped down the stairs and ran through the corridor. A crowd of fleeing spectators was surging in through the door. I don't know how I did it but I got through into the open. There was Webb. There was Marie with her fists pressed against her ears. A snarl of fangs bit at my heels. I kicked. Missed. The thing lunged for my throat. It spun in mid-air and lay still, there was a small hole just underneath its left eye. I reached Marie. I hoisted her onto my shoulders and ran back. This time three soldiers blocked my way. I hoped the camera would tell its story. It did, but too well. I was running straight at them, Marie heavy on my shoulders, and I felt nothing but a cold and intent murderousness. At that moment Webb struck one of them with a rock, fatally. As the others turned I blundered through with Marie shrieking and biting my back. Though I did not see it, that was when Webb was killed, as he threw rocks at the other two. I put her down. I shook her mercilessly.

'Marie! Marie!'

Slowly she came out of her delirium. We could not stay there. My car was in the back of the building in the underground garage. Even at that moment, others were throwing themselves into the building and desperately looking this way and that for a hiding place or some way to get the hell off that campus.

'I'm going to try and find my car, Marie. It's all right, but we've got to get out of this place.'

There was a damp red patch at the back of her head. A thin trickle of blood oozed down the corner of her lips. I picked her up. She was not heavy, never had been. And I ran. Bumping into others who were also trying to get away. Stumbling. Now and again, having to slow down and literally crawl through them. But finally we made it. It was quiet and cold but the relief of actually getting there was overwhelming. I had bundled her into the car and was about to slam my own door when there came towards us a running, crouching figure, clutching at a bloodsoaked shoulder. I recognized her, one of Nick's friends. I opened the rear door and she fell in and slammed it shut. We shot out of the garage. The tall circular complex of modern architecture was soon behind us. There was a road block ahead. I braked. I took off my coat and threw it at the girl in the back. She put it on, covering her bloodsoaked shoulder. I swung back into the road, joined the long queue of cars and waited my turn, fingering Marie as though there was only one thing on my mind. The press card did it. We were through. I drove straight home. I was mad at Marie. I was glad she was alive. I could not believe it. And the girl, Susan, dead Nick's girl, she needed a doctor. I phoned Stephen to take care of it.

The doctor who turned up was Sordid Joe, a drunk who had been struck off the register. But he was all right. He knew his job. Soon Susan was fast asleep in the spare bedroom. Marie only needed a few stitches at the back of her head. I poured myself a stiff drink. Marie said she did not want anything. She sat on the floor humming to herself as though nothing had happened. I wanted her to explain what she had been doing at that thing - how she had got there. I looked at her for a very long time and decided to keep my mouth shut.

I took out my wallet to pay Sordid Joe but he said,

'No. A few drinks will take care of that.'

I poured him a stiff one. If I knew Joe at all this was going to be a long talkative session. We had been together at college. He was brilliant. Had had the whole future before him. He set up practice in the town and soon married. She was beautiful and shy and a teacher's only daughter. There were no children. Joe drank his way through

surgery, until he could not hide it any more. A patient died underneath his scalpel. The inquiry found Joe culpable. It was actually Precision which demanded, dally, that the culprit be brought to justice. I wrote the articles, illustrating them with grimly realistic photographs of clinics and operating theatres. I discovered that some of the evidence used in the inquiry was faked. The editor refused to publish the fresh material. I resigned. I handed over to Joe's counsel all the things I had found out but not before Joe, himself, had personally socked me on the jaw. Another inquiry was set up and though it cleared Joe he had, by this time, amassed a series of convictions for being drunk and disorderly, drunk and incapable, drunk and this and that. It seemed whatever Joe did, he would end up in court for it. His wife for a time stuck by him. But she soon cleared out. Katherine, that was her name, a tall well-built woman with an extremely sensitive face and a strong sense of loyalty. No one blamed her when she left him. Sordid Joe seemed to be aggressively setting out on a course of self-destruction. He kept himself in drinks by doing backdoor abortions and using other illicit cures; when these were not forthcoming he took out his guitar and sang in the streets with his hat at his side on the pavement.

Even as I looked at him downing his drink in one gulp I envied him. Envied him his apparent freedom. He came and went like the wind and rain. He did not repine no matter what cage they put him in. He ate and he drank only when the food and the drink were there. When they were not there he did not make a fuss. He played his guitar, for those pennies from heaven. As for women, he frequented the bars and brothels and in those places there were bosoms which wished him luck and bedded him down. Sometimes Katherine would think of him . . . especially when the weather was bad and he had been thrown out of his room by his landlord. Then she would seek him out, through the driving rain, seek him out from pub to pub, from brothel to brothel and when she found him bring him home with her and wash him and feed and wring the cold desperation out of his soul. But it would never last. He would look around and she would remind him of all the things he could have been and he would feel like a 'kept woman' and force rows and slam the door behind him. To once more roam the streets and be free. Very rarely he would appear on my doorstep, sheepishly borrow

some money and again disappear. Now, there he stood, his back to the fire, refilling his glass. On his head, the wild mane of grey hair, around his shoulders the threadbare overcoat, and on his feet, the large ungainly tramp's boots. His long thin fingers trembled slightly.

'I never thought we could do it, you know,' he said, 'I never thought we could give the bastards such hell. But now we're doing it, I can't believe anything will come of it. There'll just be more bodies to sew up, more insanities to mend. Shit, its taken years off me seeing what's happening out there. That girl, Susan, she's going to be all right. Needs a bit of sleep and rest. She's as virile in the soul as an ox. She'll pull through. As for you, Marie, physically you're fine but I'm not a soul-healer so I can't say anything else. Only that you should take things easy. It's never as black and serious as you think. I bumped into a fine wench last night. She was at the end of her tether. A bit down in the mouth and long in the tooth but when all is said and done - a fine sprightly wench. She quoted Job the whole night. Ah, the slings and arrows of outrageous misfortune! Everyone is bristling with them. Nowadays we're all like porcupines. That boy, Nick, gave me a poem about it the other day. I've got it somewhere in my pockets. This is it; all very crudely depressing. It's probably the last he wrote. There are these two stanzas. Listen:

*'My mind grows darker each day
And colder, harder
No seed can grow
My tongue wearies of speech
And is dumb, harsh
Entombed alive*

*'The time to come
Is perpetual night
And I am unprepared
For such prolonged sleep
But only note how heavy
My eyelids grow*

'Rather trashy but then all last words are like that. They screen from view diseases that have no esteem. Susan will probably want it.'

I took the poem. My mind was enclosed within Marie's silence. I wished Sordid Joe would finish his drinking and then go. I grabbed a whole bottle of whisky, stuffed it into Joe's overcoat pocket and led him to the door, muttering, 'Some other time, Joe, some other time.' He took it with no ill grace. When I returned Marie had stretched out on the sofa and she was fanning herself with her hand. At least I thought so until she said quietly:

'My eyes - it's my eyes.'

The words jumped out of my boots.

'Marie! You can see? You can see?'

But whatever we tried, she still could not see. After a long moment she said,

'I felt chinks of light.'

I held her in my arms and let her cry, she who could not see me, could not see the pictures and drawings I made, she who felt me, touched me, tasted me, smelt me, wrung me in her sleep without ever, ever seeing me. And I feared her or rather feared, sometimes, that her blindness was the only thing I loved about her. There were days when I knew that all my feeling for her was bound up with that fragile shell of blindness, that fragile, unseeing self-contained dome. And I knew then that were I to wake up and find myself at last in that dark rotunda, crucified, dangling from chains and chords fixed to the uppermost sightlessness in her, then - I would be free. Free of the sunlight and the nights, free of all the senses, free of all the thoughts, the visions of a visceral fate. I would have turned the lamp inside out; the lamp which Stephen had grimly turned outside in. That exquisite refutation - how I hoped for it! But then I would turn and toss and see another shameless dawn rise from the east and know that such an overturning, such a providence, however close to the surface it lay would never, like the kraken, creep out of the sea into my life. In the bedroom, in the dark, it was eerie and sweet, as though the prolonged spasm of mutual contact were a marriage between heaven and hell, between mortal and spirit, a fusion of darkness and light.

The first night, I had put out the light but she slipped from my grasp and escaped from the bed. It was pitch dark. She was very still

and somewhere in the room. I could feel she was not on the bed. I groped for the light switch. The light did not come on. I flicked it on and off, on and off. The light did not come on. She was somewhere in the pitch dark room.

'Marie.'

I felt light-headed, expectant. This was her game. This was her own kind of basic experiment. I groped about, around the room, all over the walls, under the bed, and in the wardrobe. I could not find her. It struck me that whereas I was bumping into things and blundering through, searching for her, she had not once knocked into anything or upset any of the furniture. The door was locked, the windows were secure. Where was she?

'Marie?'

I shivered. She was in her own black sunlight.

'Marie!'

I searched everywhere in that room five or six times. Tried to conjure her back into existence from that pitch dark light. I was thinking very morbid, scary things and standing very still in order to catch any sign, or sound, she made. Suddenly I knew she was right there behind me. I turned. And I knew she was again right behind me. I turned. I turned this way and turned that way. I turned everywhere. Fast. Sharply. I was dancing to her song, a very old and incantatory song. My feet thumped and drummed the floor. Turning this way, that way. Rapidly. It dinned in my ears. It stunned my innermost reserves. She was down there at my feet, between my knees, eating my penis, making the dark furnace roar. I reached down. She was not there. The walls seemed to shake against the blast of the song. She was on her toes, arched back low and vibrant, her legs wide open. I wrung my loins around the speed of the song. My tongue kissed and sank deeper and deeper and her hips quivered like a broken string. We rode the crest of that sound again and again and I shall not know such another till the waves recoil.

Six

'Cock-a-Doodle-do!'

Susan plucked off her shoe and aimed.

'Cock-a-'

The shoe smacked into the cockerel which fell squawking from the fence and disappeared grumbling volubly in its throat.

'There, I've lost my shoe,' she said wonderingly. 'I've always wanted to lose it. I may as well lose the other one. Whoever finds them will have a pair.'

With that she flung the other one after the first one.

We turned into the garden. At the door I was about to say goodbye when she bit her lip and poked at it with her index finger and said vaguely.

'You could drop in, you know. You're all right.'

She rang the bell. Katherine, herself, opened it. She wore a kitchen-stained cotton frock and had broken eggshells in her other hand. The sun went out of her smile when she saw that Susan was not alone. But Susan said,

'I'll vouch for him. He's all right.'

Katherine still stood astride the door.

I turned to go.

Angrily, Susan remonstrated:

'He's the one who took care of me when I was shot. I have a room in his house you can all use when it's necessary. Besides, I don't see how you can doubt my judgement. Look, I'll fuck off with him and you know where you can stuff your suspicions. He's married. His

wife is blind. Shit, I'm not fucking off anywhere. We're going right in.'

And with amazing energy she grabbed my arm, pushed Katherine aside and we were in. Like sardines. We went into the kitchen. Katherine came in slowly, mind drawn up straight. She said,

'He's the one who hounded my husband with all those sensational articles about justice. I don't object to him on any other grounds, Susan. I wasn't doubting your judgement, or anything. I know him. He destroyed my marriage. He ruined Joseph. And now he gives him the occasional handout so that he can destroy himself with drink. But since you are here you better have breakfast.'

Susan was about to crack an egg into a pan. She did not look at me.

'Is this true? Katherine never blows her top for nothing.'

I sank into a chair.

'Yes,' I said.

Katherine threw the eggshells into the trashcan. Her voice was thin and strained,

'He made up for it, Susan. He did his own investigation and found that the evidence had been faked. I'm sorry. I had a rough time with Joe last night. He's out there again.'

She dunked a greasy pot into the sink. I said,

'Look, I know I'll probably bump into him soon. Can I give him any message?'

She had squeezed washing liquid into the hot water and had begun to scrub the pot and the plates. The brown scarf which bound her hair and trailed down between her shoulders rocked rhythmically with the movements of her head. She was a powerful woman.

'He knows already,' she said. 'He knows the message already. I've been giving it to him all these years. But sure, give it to him again. Tell him I want him to come home.'

'I will.'

Susan scraped her eggs from the pan. They were done hard and stringy at the blackened edges. She divided them into two and gave me one. She nodded at the refrigerator.

'The other things are in there. The cornflakes are somewhere by that catfood. It's probably empty. What did you do? When you found it was faked.'

'The editor wouldn't touch it with a crowbar. I had to resign.'

'I like doing them that way, you know - it's not bad cooking, is it? It was the only way. I can see that. Kathy, have you got any clean underwear I can borrow?'

'It's out on the line, somewhere. Unless Chris has been at it again.'

'Didn't he go see that analyst?'

Katherine nodded.

She nodded very meaningfully.

Susan gaped. She slit her throat with a forefinger gesture:

'You mean ... ?'

'Yes,' Katherine said.

'You forgot something, Susan,' I said. 'We're going shopping later on.'

'- But I can't go without clean underwear. It would stink the changing room. Besides, I like clean underwear when it's there to be put on.'

She cupped her hand over her eyes and peered out through the grimy window. The washing line was empty, clean. Her face fell.

'The bastard! It's not fair. Of course I know he's ill but this is a bit much. Who the fucking psycho does he think he is. I know it's not his fault. He did have a lousy childhood in a motherfucking environment and all that but how can I go shopping without clean underwear! O shit - it's simple. I'll go without any. You won't mind will you?'

I shook my head emphatically. Susan said:

'Kathy, how goes it now? With you and everybody. Okay?'

'What do you expect? In this house no one ever changes. We all come changed already. I've got a headache but that's because Joseph was here. I didn't sleep a wink.'

'You fucked throughout?'

'Yes and no.'

Susan pecked up.

'Elaborate,' she demanded.

Kathy pulled down the drying towel and began to wipe the cleaned dishes. She was almost smiling to herself.

'It was the usual,' she said.

'The Special?'

'A lousy fuck,' Katherine said. 'He was drunk. I won hands down. Chris acted as the referee. I knocked him out in the third round.'

'Lemonade?' Susan asked.

I nodded. As she poured it, I looked at the gold chain around her neck. She saw me looking at it. She opened the locket and showed me the picture inside. She and Nick done rare beautifully, together. She clicked it shut.

'You know Kathy, I haven't had a fuck since I was shot. I haven't even thought about it either. That bullet really had it in for me.'

She hitched up her skirts.

'Do you think my legs are okay?'

The words stuck in my throat. They were really stunning. And the rounded contour, pear-shaped, of her snug bottom. . . .

'Kathy! Look at him slobbering. Shit I didn't mean it that way but I guess you have more than answered my question. Is that the topic today?'

She was pointing at a poster on the far wall.

'Not exactly,' Kathy said.

'What do you mean?'

Kathy stared at me and then seemed to make up her mind.

'The action is going to start. Again.'

'But I didn't finish my explosives training. And I didn't finish . . .'

'That's what the meeting is about. A crash course. We'll probably go to Devil's End to test the stuff.'

'Today?'

'Not exactly. Soon as I know myself I'll let everybody know.'

Susan was rubbing her shoulder. The one that had healed after some grim complications which Sordid Joe had finally routed.

'They shot me . . . shot me right here,' she said.

There was an eerie sting in her voice. I drank my lemonade.

'I guess we better go do that shopping,' she said finally.

Kathy came to the door with us. Susan remembered she had not taken off her underwear and she ran up the stairs to do so. Kathy gripped my hand. It was a powerful grip.

'Look after her well,' she said.

She was about to say something else when Susan appeared. Kathy shut the door gently after us. When I turned round and looked from the road, she was stooped over the sink. I would tell Sordid Joe. I would tell it to him. And I was not going to take any shit from him. He was going to come home.

'Isn't it beautiful!' Susan exclaimed swinging her arms to encompass the whole morning sunlight. 'It makes me want to cry, sometimes, how crazy and absurdly beautiful it all can be. That catfood in the kitchen. I had a cat once. Ginger. He was wonderfully crazy. Like nothing on earth. He was run over by a car. But in the house we all pretend he's still alive and any time we do any shopping we buy him his special brand of food. Catmax. Will you remember it? Sometimes I forget and when I remember I just can't get over having forgotten like that. But hey, I didn't take any money - I had better go back.'

She had turned and was running back. I bunched up and ran after her. She ran like the wind, peering over her shoulder and laughing and increasing her speed. I had caught up with her but was still behind her when suddenly she stopped dead and crouched right in my path. I was sent flying over her and landed in a heap. But before I could say anything, she rolled over me and smothered me with kisses. Giggling.

'Did you see that? I thought I was out of training. JEE-sus! I really am very fit now. Are you okay? I wanted Kathy to see it. She wants us to be fit all the time. I agree. You know, you never know when you might have to run and they are running after you. You shouldn't have done that. I wasn't thinking really. It was all reflex. I don't like people to run after me but I'll make an exception of you. But you must remember that if you run after me you're likely to get hurt. I mean that. I really do.'

Kathy had opened the kitchen window. Now she shouted,

'What did you forget?'

And Susan shouted back,

'Money!'

'Here ... catch!'

Susan smartly caught the heavy purse. I was dusting myself. I was ... those kisses!

'Come on, let's go. I probably will never have a day of freedom like this.'

Her hand reached out. I took it. But she shook her head and slid it round my waist. My hand found her waist.

'I know what we'll do,' she said. 'To make the shopping fun. You'll buy my things and I'll buy yours. You'll buy what you think I

like. And I'll do the same for you. That way will probably tell us if we're suited for one another or not. I did that with Nick before I ever let him fuck me. He got everything wrong. Sometimes I think he did it on purpose. But I don't think so. He was never the kind of person to do anything on purpose. Of course those last lines of poetry have a sordid deliberate ring about them so I may be mistaken about it all. Anyway, even if we don't kick off, I would rather glue to you than to another male. I mean, you're conveniently here and now and I don't have any future or once upon a time. I'm talking shit today. I'm sure Marie will not mind my sharing you just this one day, do you think?'

I wished she had not mentioned Marie. But then what was the use of trying to be devious and oblique?

'She would mind very much,' I said. 'You mustn't ever ask her if she minds.'

'Why not?'

'She'd be hurt.'

'Is she that queer? I don't see anything to be hurt about. Many tapers can be lit from a single flame without causing any changes in that flame. You know?'

'I know.'

'O! I know. She's blind and therefore needs to absolutely trust you. I can understand that. Have you got any mints?'

I shook my head. She pulled me into a grocer's shop. I wished she had not mentioned Marie. Marie was pregnant again. And I desperately hoped that this time we would be lucky. The last time had been killing us ever since.

My mouth was full of mint, and the sharp tang made me feel more ready for whatever the day would offer. We found the car. My cameras were in the back. Susan said carefully:

'What do you feel about violence?'

I eased into the middle lane as we came up to the traffic lights.

'Like I feel about snakes.'

'I mean politically,' she said in a voice that was quiet and serious.

I could feel it was the car and the cameras she was reacting to. Possessions. She did not feel right in a car. 'What did I feel about violence?' I said carefully.

'I have, ordinarily, no feelings at all about it, because I am merely its photographic chronicler.'

I remembered what I had felt on seeing Marie, a blind island in that fighting campus. But I did not want to mention Marie. This woman beside me, this girl, was too precious a temptation to pass it by. And it had been a long time since I had felt what she was making me feel. It had been too long. I felt my age now, but with her time was somehow irrelevant. She chewed it over and finally decided to give me the benefit of the doubt.

'I mean,' she said, 'I wouldn't like you to fuck me just because you had a thing about me and violence. Sometimes Nick was like that. It was sick, you know. Why you probably know what I mean because your wife is blind and you probably fuck her better for it. You know?'

'Hell, Susan, I wish you wouldn't bring Marie into this. It makes me feel - miserable.'

'It shouldn't. You should open yourself up. Guilt is not part of our natural make-up. It's a disease we catch. And if you catch it, you've got to get rid of it. Cure it drastically. You know. How can you feel guilty about Marie when, as a photographic chronicler, you don't feel anything about all the institutionalized violence out there? Don't you see there is something wrong somewhere. But if it makes you feel any better I won't mention her again. Was she born blind?'

I gritted my teeth.

'Christ! I only want to know. You'd think I'd asked you to change three degrees Celsius into its Fahrenheit equivalent. Anyway, fantasies can be useful especially when you are in danger of becoming impotent. I tried it once and it worked.'

'Susie!'

She laughed.

'You said that,' she jeered, 'you said that like you want me to do the schoolgirl act. Personally I detest all thought of sex between old men and little girls though of course I have no rational case to state against it. Have you ever tried it - having sex with a little girl. The little bitches, they know a few innocent tricks which those long in the tail like myself cannot carry off quite so innocently. You shouldn't grit your teeth, you know. It's bad for the gums. I used to do it as a child but only in the classroom when any other form of protest was likely to get me into trouble. Do you know how old I am? Guess.'

'Nineteen.'

'I will not correct you.'

'Susie, will you take your hand out of my pocket. I might crash the car.'

'You mean C.R.A.S.H?'

'No.'

'Did you ever fuck her when she was eight months pregnant?'

I managed to wildly swing the car back onto the road. Thankfully all the pedestrians had been looking where they were going.

'Look, she said, let's just go on driving. We'll do the shopping later. Besides, I haven't had a long healthy ride in months. You know. And do stop gritting your teeth. They'll fall out, or make you impotent. My grandmother used to frighten my brother with statements like that. But whatever she tried she couldn't stop him masturbating. The only way to stop that is to cut it off. Are you circumcised? I heard that there is a country where girls are also circumcised. I wonder what it is they actually cut out? Do you think it's the clitoris? That would be terrible. Can you even begin to think it? I can't. Christ, I'd hang on to my clitoris even if they were cutting my throat.'

We were out in the countryside by now. The hard sunlight was beginning to sweat like gelignite. It was rolling country. When the fields petered out there was, on either side of the road, grassland dotted with acacias whose yellowish leaves seemed ethereal as they slightly vibrated against the stark bright blue backdrop of the late morning sky. The woman, the girl beside me, the car and its almost inaudible drone, the sweltering asphalt and its unending ribbon unfolding always in front of us, they were like a magical arrangement, a fugue at once mystical and concrete, and I gradually unfolded inside myself and once again caught the serious carefree joy of it. I accelerated, slamming my foot right down to the floor. The car lurched forward. The view on either side sped past, backwards. Straight ahead, the bright blue dome of the sky seemed impervious, unutterable, glacial, indifferent. I did not care. Susan flung her head back and laughed long and loud. When she stopped I could still hear laughter, a laughter resonant and clear and free. I realized it was me laughing and I laughed even more. We had money. We could just drive on right through the heart of our country and speed towards its

outermost limit and there hang, as it were, over the jagged precipice of our history. Out of that bright blue sky seemed to flash a dazzling bolt of lightning. It shot through my very soul and left a quivering there. I slowed down, flung one hand across Susan's shoulder and stopped. I locked the doors and we jumped the little wooden fence and ran across the short tufts of green grass and picked our way through a marshy patch, crossed that, and with a vengeance tore off our clothes. A shrill harmonica seemed to blast a prolonged note through my brain. But I could see that she could hear it too. At last we lay back exhausted, I mean on our backs, looking up at the sky. All that immense tract of the universe was our private paradise. And this green, this quickening land, it was there for us to roam. It shrilled again and again through my ears, through all my senses, through all my unrefusing flesh. We wrestled and fell apart, spent and panting, and raced each other all through that unending noon. We picked up our clothes and without putting them on raced back to the car and drove a few miles further on, to the river, where we swam in the green stream. Afterwards we walked slowly back to the car, apart. She was kicking at the flame lilies and I picked a bunch of them and threw them in the back among the cameras.

'Shit! Let's not go back. Let's drive on to the next town,' she said. 'We'll make believe for just a few days. Kathy will understand. Besides what I still have to learn about those explosives wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'It could be the difference between life and death for you, Susan.'

'I don't care. Didn't you feel it too back there? Didn't you?'

'I did.'

What the hell did it matter? Marie did matter. But now that was very distant if only a very distant invisible present. There were always the lies that if not found out would at least not hurt.

'Right, let's go, Susan.'

She jumped in.

'You're wonderful. Thank you so much,' she said as I started the car.

'Susie, Susie, gratitude is unnatural. It's like a disease. If you catch it make sure you cure it before it kills you. You'll find cigarettes in my coat. Please light me one. Do you know I've always thought that I killed my parents.'

I reached with my mouth for the cigarette. She planted a kiss instead.

'They have to be killed. Each generation has to kill the one that precedes it. It's the only way. Did you actually kill them?'

'I still don't know what happened. I was very young. A baby. But when it happened I was sure I had done it.'

'Each person has to work off his Oedipal thing. You know. With me it was simpler. My father wanted me. There would have been a scandal. But mother found out and packed me off to live with my grandmother.'

'Did he ... ?'

'Fuck me? Yes.'

'Can I have that cigarette now, please.'

The smoke scorched my throat and burnt deep into my lungs. It made me deliciously dizzy.

'What was it like?'

'He was a very handsome man. Not like all the spotty gum-chewing youths who hung around my skirts. Besides he was very good. At it.'

She looked very thoughtful and added,

'But not as good as you, you know. Do you always screw like a circular saw?'

'Well, let me see. Only once before, on my wedding night.'

'Was she a bleeding mess afterwards?'

'No. I was.'

How had I felt? As if I had become astonishingly blind and Marie had begun to radiate with unseen insights. After that I had begun to fear the bedroom. Fear and long for it to embalm me with blindness. And outside it, it became the camera lens of the photographic chronicler.

'Have you ever thought of leaving her?'

'No. But I have now. Christ! It's so soul-destroying being with you.'

'But be reasonable. If you do have a soul then the little midget must be killed.'

'It's supposed to be indestructible.'

'They used to say the same thing about the atom.'

'But that's different.'

'What's so different about it? Please elaborate,' she demanded.
'A soul is metaphysical. An atom is physical.'
That did not sound quite right.
'What's to stop metaphysics becoming as deadfy as nuclear physics?'

'Shut up.'

'What did you say? What did you just say to me?'

'I said SHUT UP.'

'Please stop the car. I'll walk.'

'Susie ...'

'Don't SHUT ME UP and then Susie me like that, you snivelling worm. I said stop the car and I'll walk. STOP THE CAR.'

'All right, my dear. As you wish. But for the record I would like to apologize now.'

The car had come to a dead halt. She had got out. She meant everything she said.

'Apologize for what?'

'For shutting you up.'

'You didn't shut me up. Nobody can shut me up. When you said SHUT UP you were irritated by your own ignorance. You were hiding from yourself, your own ignorance. You were insulting your own intelligence. So you should apologize to yourself. And I want to hear it. I refuse to sit in the same car with a motherfucker who has no self-respect. I WANT TO HEAR THAT APOLOGY.'

'I'm sorry, motherfucker.'

'NO, no. Say it to your reflection in the rear-view mirror there.'

I looked up. I adjusted the mirror. I confronted the bastard.

'Look mister, I am sorry. I am very sorry I insulted your intelligence.'

Slowly, in a stately way, she adjusted herself into the car. I restarted it. We sped off on two squealing tyres that tore a heart-rending sound from the asphalt.

'What was all that about?' I asked.

'About you, of course.'

I sunk into thought and said finally,

'Of course.'

A brick of silence crashed through the windscreen. She reached into the back seat and began to throw the flame lilies one by one at

me. Then she took one of the cameras. She squeezed herself against her door and mounted the camera on her frail shoulder. Frail? She began to shoot me. I could hear the film whirring. I could hear her fidgeting about changing the angle from time to time. I could not keep it up, that mask of impassivity. I grinned.

She tired of it, that basic experiment. She looked about listlessly. Her eyes lit upon a traffic sign that was speeding towards us.

'STOP.'

I did.

'Have you got a hammer. Or something metal and heavy.' She gestured meaningfully at the sign. It said 'Winston 15 Miles'. 'Those things bug me,' she added.

I took out the heavy hammer and the equally heavy jack. She took the hammer. She let out a bloodcurdling war shriek and hammered at the sign.

'Destroy! DESTROY THE SIGN.'

I had attacked it from the other side. Crunch. CRUNCH VVB-RRAAKK. It fell. She leaped on it. CRUNCH VBRRRKKK GA. When it looked like it would never get up again except as scrap, she spat into her palms, rubbed them together and grabbed the heavy hammer for a last mighty stroke. I turned my face away. This was more than any game.

'GVRK!!!'

I threw the hammer and the jack back into the boot. As we drove off she turned to me accusingly.

'Your heart wasn't in it,' she said. 'How do you expect anything to happen if your heart really isn't in it. By heart of course I mean all of yourself not that rather overated plumbing organ. Have you ever eaten a lamb's heart? I did once in a girl's detention centre. I forget what I was in for that time. Probably GBH. And one night it was lambs' hearts for dinner. I could not stand the sight of meat for weeks.'

'What's GBH?'

'Grievous bodily harm.'

I don't know how I kept the steering wheel steady.

'Who did you harm?'

'On that specific occasion it was father. I didn't mean to hurt him. But he was getting into my hair, you know. I smashed him when he

called me a conniving cunt. I mean he had just screwed me and now also wanted the satisfaction of calling me of all crude things a conniving cunt. Your own father, for God's sake. That's why I said they have to be killed. Of course there is a strictly revolutionary diagnosis about why they should be buried by us but when my own father, after screwing me nicely, called me a conniving cunt, the whole thing was suddenly clear in my head. It was like you saying back there SHUT UP after having fucked me like nothing on earth. Do you understand now?

I was beginning to.

'I am beginning to,' I said.

And I really was.

The grin was now on her face.

I suppose you write poems, too. Like Nick did. Poems should not be written but brought into being, brought right out into living reality. Nick had spasms of being when he would be really alive, you know. But then he would become shifty and slink off into his privacy and for them down. The old prophetic books in the Old Testament have a thing about things written by the finger of God. And all this about divine dictation, automatic writing and so forth. If we didn't write it but lived it. You know. LIVED IT. IT. But shit, it's never there. When it is, you wake up and find you have committed GBH. If not old fashioned murder. The impulse to destroy, that's all we have left. Everything going up in deadly mushrooms of ire. You know. This car, for instance. Why don't we stop and wreck it? That hammer is really good and my heart is in it.'

My hands on the steering wheel would have trembled had I not been gripping it with all my might like a learner driver.

'William Blake's 'Tiger Tiger' has a luminous force precisely because it excites in us, from the bedrock, an opposite and more dire force which can hammer this created tiger into bits and pieces of flying sparks. Societies too have a similar effect. Like nations. All these grand designs. They can be reduced into brief, soon burnt-out cinders. The very sight of a living thing has a similar effect. Smash and pulp it into grains of livid dust. Nick could never quite grasp this. You see he suffered from a conscience. I tried very hard to erase it for him. I was there when he died. Death left him pitifully crestfallen. We could have hit it off so well together. His tempera-

ment was okay. It was just this conscience. You know. You are probably infected too. Why have so many willingly infected themselves with it? I can never understand it. But then if I did, I would not be able to blow them up with bombs. I think of myself as the sole and significant womb of this tottering nation. And I deal out death, not every nine months but every day, every hour, every instant. You don't have to understand. You are my chronicler. My finger inscribes pictures through you. Photographs. It engraves through you a panorama of multitudes spontaneously disintegrating, igniting each other, and the land on which they stand and die is one of igneous fires. That, if you did not understand is who I am. Now stop the car. I want you to fuck me even better than you did back there. I want you to fuck the inside of your own ravings.'

When we returned to the car I was a man recalled from his stinking tomb. I exulted in my new flesh, my new mind, my new and compelling world. Gone was that corrupt birth long ago. I had arrived in the place I should have been from the beginning. As I slid into the driving seat, I could feel my eyes glittering, sharpening out towards a new and concise visibility.

'Drive home. We've still got to do the shopping. I can hear Ginger crying for his special food.'

Seven

I had arrived at the camp at sunrise. Devil's End looked like the name implied. Jagged rock, granite outcrops, stony valleys, sharp flinty peaks and running through them, underground, a network of caves and interlocking tunnels, natural and man-made. Devil's End itself rose sheer from the flinty grey waves to a height of nineteen thousand feet. Within its caves and tunnels were the prisoners' quarters, the Jade Chamber and the Black Hall. I had come with Katherine, first by car and then by horse and finally on foot. As soon as we arrived I checked my cameras for damage. It was slight and I soon fixed it. My room which faced the sea was screened from it by a thick steel door; it was also connected to a tunnel that led to the Head Office where I found Chris dozing with his feet on the desk. He gave a slight start when I entered, and furtively shifted out of sight a pair of women's briefs. I stretched out my hand.

'I am the photographer,' I said.

He said nothing. He stood up. He was short, fat, sweaty, and completely bald. When he released my hand I could still feel the damp but powerful impression of his grip. I could not determine his age. He was dressed in denims - trousers, shirt, jacket. Around his neck were heavy strings of shark teeth that dangled down to his navel.

'What's Susan like in bed?'

'Very good.'

With that he made a strange mark in a ledger that was open on the desk. The double page was full of the same strange marks. He handed me a pen.

'Please sign here.'

He turned the book round towards me. I signed. There were all these signatures and each had slash against it, the same strange mark.

'So that is your name. We don't use our own names here. You must call me Chris. You've met Kathy and Susie. I shall introduce you to the others as ... What would you like us to call you?'

I didn't even think. I said,

'Christian.'

'And Christian you shall be. Now, please come with me. I want to test something.'

I followed him into the tunnel. We passed through huge rooms in which vague human figures were poised in very excruciating postures. Some dangled from chains fixed to the roof. (One hung upside down and dangled by his testicles.) Some were on a redhot treadmill. Some were transfixed upside down by huge nails driven into the rock passing through their ankles or their knees. Others—

'Don't dawdle, man. We haven't got all day,' Chris said. 'Besides you'll have your chance with all of them.'

'My chance?'

'Of course. A little invention of mine. In the Jade Room. How long are you here for?'

'Three days.'

'Time enough, isn't it, YOU?'

And he kicked a grey haired skeletal man who looked as though he was transfixed to the floor by a series of sharp narrow blades that cut through buttocks and thighs. 'He guards the Jade Room. He was the fucking head of the CBI. We grabbed him seven years ago. The sons of bitches absolutely refuse to pay the ransom. I can't say I blame them. Don't dawdle, for shitting sake. You'll have your chance all right.'

'To photograph?'

'Of course, old boot, that's what you're here for. We've got to get rid of all these split-arse fucking unpaid ransoms that are crowding us out here. But we do so in a spectacular manner. Susan probably explained it to you on your initiation. How was she in bed again?'

'Spectacular.'

He turned round wrinkling his brow. He said,

'That's not what you said in the office.'

He fixed unwinking eyes on me.

'Disloyalty here is a capital offence,' he said. 'Remember that. Now once more: How is Susan in bed?'

'Very good,' I said.

I had almost saluted.

'You can salute if you want to but you know that's not in this outfit because it's undemocratic and smirks of military totalitarianism. You know. By the way do you smoke.'

'Have one,' I said offering him the packet.

'NO! NO! NO! Nobody smokes tobacco here. You have to smoke what we smoke. Here's your ration. If you smoke different that's undemocratic and upsetting. It smirks of individualistic opportunism. You know. Not that I don't know different.'

I took my ration and thanked him.

'Don't thank me. It was already yours long before Susan found you. You, of course, meditate sometimes.'

'Never.'

'That's bad. If you don't I wonder what she saw in you. It was the same with that young man Nick who trans - trans—'

'Transmigrated?'

'That's the word. How did you know that? You're probably telepathic. I think psychically. I amount to nil but now and then I have told people their fortunes merely by reading their shit. You don't feel like shitting now do you? It would help a lot.'

I shook my head emphatically.

He sighed.

'We could shit together you know. I know a lovely place very close to the peak of Devil's End. It looks just like it must have done when Prometheus was bound. That's how the cult began. Of course in reality he had to shit in his pants because he was bound all the time. But then lots of religious twist the facts somewhat to achieve the desired end. So we think of Prometheus as the first man to not only read his shit but also to suffocate in it. You see he couldn't get rid of it. It was right there between his ankles and steadily accumulating until finally he shit that last morsel that tipped the balance and it suffocated him. Get it. It's very simple actually. Before I was transformed, I tried at Oxford to present

my Ph.D thesis on this topic of shit in Ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts but the bastards wouldn't even look at it. Let alone smell it. That taught me a lot about academic fascism. You know. Not that I don't know the other side of the question. But no, you don't want to shit?'

There was a strident note of desperation in his voice. I shook my head very vigorously and said,

'No, but thank you all the same.'

'What did they tell you about me? They are always saying nasty things about me. Can you hear them whispering. No - that's probably because of the high sea. Perhaps you like to shit in the sea? A-hal I got you there. You like to shit in the sea, don't you? You were about to use that as an explanation for not shitting with me on Devil's End peak. I can read minds you know simply from the fact that all living human beings always have a little solid shit inside them at any hour of night and day. If you study their faces intently enough you will see the shit in there and it will reveal what they are thinking. I was right, wasn't I about you and shitting in the sea?'

I had to admit that he was right.

He said warningly, wistfully,

'It's supposed to be a sign of effeminacy you know. You're not gay, are you?'

No, I am not, I thought as I shook my head. Was this the little test? Or was it his own fact-finding experiment? This priest of Prometheus. This shit-monger in the marketplace. This Chris. This female underwear scavenger.

'Strike this box of matches.'

He gave me a matchstick. I struck, lighting it. He lit up with pleasure.

'You're gay, you know. You struck it exactly the way effeminate men are supposed to do. That proves it beyond doubt. But wait how good is Susan in bed?'

I clicked my heels together and saluted:

'Very good!'

He saluted too.

'Very good, Christian. At ease. You know, I think you're full of craftiness rather than wisdom. Don't you agree?'

'You are full of shit, Chris.'

'And irritable to boot. That's interesting. Or rather, is it spirit?'

'Perhaps.'

'Well you fell for it just as we all fell for it, didn't you?'

'Fell for what?'

'The great cunt. And it's ...'

I clicked my heels.

'Very good.'

'You're sharp too. Though that's probably nerves. Do you see that one there? The one who is soldered to the rock?'

His eyes twinkled. I nodded.

'He was the photographer before you. Do you understand?'

'Are you threatening me?'

'Oh no, my dear chap. Just warning you. Nothing is ever what it seems. You probably know that, but have never actually tested it.

Look at his eyes. Are they not perhaps ... ?'

I did not have to look. I had already noticed.

'Camera lenses,' I said.

'Perhaps he is chronicling now. But if you ask me I think he is thirsty. Very thirsty.'

I took out my hip flask, unscrewed it, and took a long drink. Then I poured a little spirit into the poor fellow's quivering lips. The gaunt Adam's apple wobbled up and down. Chris chuckled.

'You'll end up like him, mark my words. Drink too was his first mistake here. Not that I don't know the other side of the coin. It's clear as daylight. Of course we never see daylight unless we want to shit on Devil's End peak. But knowing two sides does not mean one has not a side. You've ostensibly chosen yours but there is vacillation in you. Do you masturbate? When was the last time you did so?'

'I also shit,' I said. 'And I shat with Kathy an hour ago when we were coming here. Hey, what's the point of all this?'

He shook his head as though to clear it.

'Exactly,' he said.

And from the darkness above my head there came a metallic voice,

'NOT WHAT YOU WANT BUT WHAT YOU NEED.'

I looked up.

'Never mind that,' he said rubbing his chin. 'That's Sally, the intercom system. You'll soon get sick of her and her slogans. Keeps you on your toes, though, afraid your mind will be raped by the machine. Ever had electric shock treatment? No? I survived it but that's all I can say. Kathy scraped me back together and glued me into a semblance of what I had been. In the ward, you know, strapped to my bed, through the endless insinuation of the turned down radio, I could hear Sally saying "Art is not life, and cannot be a midwife to society". You played the game or they incinerated your oblique impulses. I clung to life like a leaf in autumn. Clung to the newly laundered underwear of a sibilant purpose. But, uhuh, I digress. What was it we're supposed to do? Some sort of test, wasn't it?'

'Isn't this it?' I asked.

'Interesting, is it not? Anyway, come this way. I want you to photograph something.'

The hall was floodlit with pink lights. In the pink gloom I could see a multitude of figures, smoking, whispering, meditating, embracing, staring, sleeping, dozing, scratching, and not a single eye turned to observe our entry. They might as well have been disembodied spirits, awaiting their turn in that underground place, vital, listless, with a pure spiritual suppleness that was enhanced by their nonchalant mode of dress - denim and cotton with bare toes and beads.

'I suppose you're moonstone,' he said. 'You can change the light to that if you like. The switches are here.'

Among the array of switches was one labelled MOONSTONE. I flicked that on. At once the cavern-hall was transformed into a glittering softness. And not one of that multitude even glanced up. I could hear snatches of their whispered conversations:

'Ours is the field hospital for the straight battles out there. We're the walking wounded ...'

'A brain transplant to make you conform. Bleeding from bayonets, chains, bullets, chisels ...'

'The young howl for perfection and the old with public spades dig in and the women still expect their chains ...'

'The space in the human heart has contracted into the point of a

bayonet. The potential in the human mind is primed like a lethal grenade ...'

'The nervous duration when the petals fade is the dislocation between the image and the performance. I think of ourselves as a sunset that follows no sunrise ...'

I panned the camera to take in the illimitable prospect. My shoulder ached. At the far end of the room was a small platform. A guillotine stood on it. To my right was another wooden platform. An electric chair stood on it. On my left was another small platform; a noose hung down above it. The implements of a human tradition. The multitude sat whispering and smoking within this triangle of a fatal justice. None of them took any notice of the triple executions that then proceeded to take place. I recorded everything.

Meanwhile, their endless insectlike activity continued, now and then interrupted by Sally's electronic interjections:

A voice evoked 'the teaspoon moon that holds a single drop' and continued in subdued tones to elaborate on the theme of an indefinable morrow. Another, dragging into his lungs the vision-inducing fumes, gazed back at his languorous friend a furnace of sensual questions. And the voices droned on:

'Solemnity attends neither death nor birth nor the route between. Indignities of blood and pain thunder alike from cradle and death-bed. They hurl down through life endurable miseries that no grave description can make clean or solemn ...'

A head nodded.

'I heard the muted snarl sharpening its teeth behind the common speech, the aimless chatter. You know. This indifferent panorama shot through with bloodshot cries. From tomb and boarded-up house I heard their seething material threats, their volcanic permanence underneath the narrow pavement of love ...'

One with bright violet hair quoted:

'The rapid days wheel about
Flinging in my face the facts of dust mud life and pain.'

Chris thrust his face in front of the camera, shouting:
'Fool! There is nothing there.'

I lowered the camera. They had vanished. The hall was empty.

There was no multitude, no guillotine, no electric chair, no hangman's noose. The light was not pink or moonstone's glittering softness. It was dark and cold. I had been filming eerie teeth of stalagmites and stalactites. I shivered.

Chris punched my back sympathetically.

I winced wondering if I had also imagined the blow.

'Well, there it is,' he said.

'What was it?'

'Exactly. There we agree. Not that I don't know the other side, you understand. You've failed, you know,' he added. 'A pity. Actually it's for the best. The one before you, he passed this one and woke up to find he had battered poor Franz to death with his camera. Anyway, let's go join the others. The ones who were here.'

'Where are they, for God's sake?'

'Somewhere. They are always somewhere. It's logical, isn't it? Come.'

We picked our crawling way through the icy stalactites and stalagmites. He was talking all the time. I knew it now. I was mad. But that was all right. Because this world was madder than I was. I jumped and rubbed my head where I had bumped it against a protrusion of rock. It was Sally saying moodily,

'TILL I HAVE HER I LOVE/TO LIE WITH AND PROVE.'

We came out into a brightly lit corridor with several doors on either side. It was warm and snug and I wanted to lean against the wall and just stare at the long possibility of such a corridor. There was something illusory about it, like a dream that is real but no less a dream for all that. Before we took another step, a door further down opened - suddenly unleashing the sound of a typewriter chattering rapidly - and there walked feverishly towards us a thin dark-eyed youth carrying a sheaf of pamphlets. As he passed us he thrust one into my hand. I looked at it. It said:

'DOWN WITH THE GREAT CUNT!'

Chris was chuckling to himself.

'That's the Opposition,' he said. 'The other side of the question. That's poor Franz's brother. One of these days, she'll lose all patience with him. But at the moment he is tolerated. In fact he is necessary. He is always handing out pamphlets all saying that. Of course the Great Cunt can absorb even that.'

The typing still continued to rattle from the room Franz's brother had come out of. We looked in through the door.

He had his back to us. A set of cameras and lenses lay on the floor. There was something familiar about that back, about the typing, and the thing he was typing. Chris had walked up to him and now touched him on the shoulder saying:

'Christian, I want you to meet someone you know.'

The typing stopped. Irritably, the man said,

'Who is it? Can't you see I am busy. You can't just come in here ...'

And he turned his head towards me.

I could not take away my eyes from his face. The likeness was astonishing. I was looking at myself: the hair, the mouth, the chin, the black shirt, the black jacket, the black trousers, the black socks, the black shoes. I was looking at myself. His own eyes had narrowed. He said without turning his head away:

'What's this Chris? Another of your tricks, I suppose. Anyway ...'

His voice trailed away. Finally he said,

'Hello.'

There was a trace of amusement in his voice as he said,

'I am afraid I can't do the honours. Rather busy as you can see. But perhaps you'd care for a drink? Over there.'

It was a bottle of vodka. Chris frowned. I sipped my drink slowly looking at him through its bottom. He was already stooped over the typewriter, drawing on his cigarette. I asked:

'What are you writing?'

'I don't know exactly,' he said. 'It's a long letter to myself about writing and all that. Not terribly important, at all. Anyway, welcome to Chris's YMCA, what? You look a bit rather like me, you know. Same build. Same face. And those cameras too. Did he show you the one they soldered alive to the rock. He did. That one also looked like me. But there's nothing in looks. It's the inner things which matter. Here, I am preaching. I think I'll have a drink myself too. Bad to drink and write at the same time, don't you think. Could never evoke the old Muse after the odd couple of doubles. Still, there it is. Perhaps later you'd like to go over some of the later chapters? I'm now doing what amounts to be the conclusion. Always difficult that.'

Hum. You're here for long, perhaps? The usual three days. That was my case too. But here you know three days can be three minutes, three seconds, three centuries, three millenia, three eternities. Nonsense like that but it still leaves one a bit scraggy at the seams. You never quite know if they invented you or if you invented them. Do you like vodka? There is nothing else in the whole of Devil's End. Vodka, vodka, vodka everywhere. Old Chris here probably told you drinking's not done here but that's taking it a bit steep. He's afraid of it. Was in and out of alcoholic wards all his life. Oxford did him in, you know. Can't say I blame the dreaming spires. Looking like that anyone would be tempted to do him in. Funny, talking to you, like I'm talking to myself. I do that sometimes, talking to myself I mean. It's this place, a sort of labyrinth. All the ones you meet are as lost as yourself and after a while you cease to take any human thing seriously. You just think of how long ago you had it in you to want to look for the way out of it all. To escape. I suppose you haven't thought of trying to get out of here? It's all the same really. Chris, why don't you fuck off for a while. I want to talk to him. Right? Fuck off then.'

Chris fucked off very reluctantly. He did not close the door. After a moment, my double crept up to the door, suddenly darted out and jumped back dragging Chris by the scruff of the neck.

'When I say fuck off, Chris, I mean FUCK OFF,' he said. 'I guess you want something for your trouble eh? I do have something for you. Got it from Nicola.'

And with that he thrust into Chris's hands a soiled bra. Chris could not take his eyes from it. I did not look away.

'Now, FUCK OFF.'

Chris went out, muttering to himself.

My twin swirled his drink and downed it. He made a wry face of distaste.

'Live and let live, I guess,' he said. 'I do not care to think how long I've been here. I cannot get out until I have finished that thing.'

He picked up the thing. The unfinished manuscript. He handed it to me.

'I wonder if it's you,' he mused. 'You see, there is a point in that'

manuscript when my double walks in and as it were takes over or is taken over. It depends I suppose on that fraction of an inch which separates you and I. The other one, the one soldered to that rock, I really thought it was him. I was wrong. Now I may be wrong again. One always is. You can only persevere. Especially in places like this. The design is always bigger than its separate components. I couldn't face that in my early days. One did not want truths common to all but as it were private absolutes that chiselled one into something brighter and more significant than the design. Like Susan. She can't stand the thought of anything that's comprehensible but has at the same time no relation whatsoever to herself and her designs. So she blows things up. I suppose she exploded you too. Behind a bush. And you came out a new man. That sort of thing. Don't worry you'll get over it. The thing is never to be taken over by the collective delusion either here or out there. There is a complicity in our refusals, too. But that, as Chris would say, does not mean one has not one's own side. I have been in this room for as long as I can remember inventing you from the first page of that manuscript. Or is it the other way round? You have been out there for as long as you can remember inventing me up to this point. Or perhaps there was, in the beginning, a single vague idea or word which then germinated the thought of you and I germinating each other. Endlessly. Christ, what a maze. Of course, time is like that. Especially here. It's sordid and squalid here. Sadistic. And yet in such an ephemeral way that it ceases to matter very much. That's what comes of trying to bridge the gap between intelligence and terror. A maelstrom. A whirlpool that sucks you in, and not only involves you but tears inside out the shreds of what humane considerations you started out with. But, shit, I don't think I make much sense. To myself I don't. Perhaps to you I do? We can only be totally understood by our own living reflections, however much in the end they turn out to have been delusions, illusions, mirages. But of course, even though it – and I mean I'll deliberately – understands, don't let it take over. It incorporates an inchoate and maddening idea that to reveal it to oneself is to stand up and dance with pure terror. It is the binding force of our mental and emotional potential. Those times, when it is closest to the surface, in our childhood, in our youth, in our declining years, are the gleamings that obliterate all sense of time, place and conviction making of

us furnaces of an eternal present. All this is mere preaching. But those who come here sometimes need preaching to if they are to remain themselves. You seek a transformation that can never come to one of your nature, a twisting and turning nature. You think of making a breakthrough imaginatively and concretely but it's not the other side that you want but only the process towards it. That perhaps was your misunderstanding of Susan. She is less and yet more than you supposed. Less because a single word from you can break her hold. More, because it can cost you your life. They look as though they are playing. They do not play. They are really going out there to destroy, to kill. You've probably never really destroyed or killed anything in your life – you merely wished to, wished to desperately, but never took that irrevocable step. Think of Marie. She is the test you have not yet undergone. And I can tell you now that whatever you do you will kill her. Shall I call Chris back now?

I shook my head.

I shook my head again.

'What do you know about Marie? What do you mean I will kill her? What's all this?'

'Keep your shirt on, my dear chap. What does one ever mean? Exactly, as Chris would say. It is not what I know that intrigues me now but what I can never know. Imagine it, there are things which our mind and imagination can never think or imagine. And if we are mere puppets to these things then . . . Do you see? I don't see. But perhaps you do. I have adjective to define you. You have nouns to define me. If we do away with the adjectives and the nouns can you imagine the transformation that would take place within you, within me, within Marie, within Stephen? But of course we cling to the adjectives and we stoutly hold on to the nouns. They weave descriptions which are neither lethal nor fatal. Fascinations, complexities that, when inspected under a fine microscope, neither fascinate nor are they complex. You live on the periphery of a centrifugal life – is there not an impossibility there? You live on the outer reaches of a centripetal life – there is also a contradiction there. The head that outpaces its body's marathon, or the body that outruns its head's hundred yards of sprinting, this does not make for clear thinking, clean feelings. Anyway, what is clear thinking after all? And clean feeling? My first days here Nicola nagged me about thinking. She

says one should not think at all for thinking gets in the way of living. And feelings have a way of doing that too. According to her gospel. Sometimes I am inclined to agree with her. I have tried to write without thinking and without feeling. But that assumes a perfect mastery of the language, the medium. That's not easy to have, in fact impossible, for language is always in a state of flux, of change. Hence the thinking and the feelings always intrude. Sometimes for the better. But mostly for the worse. I suppose I am one of the things you have to photograph here. Get on with it if you like. I'll just talk. You didn't bring a tape recorder by any chance?

I shook my head. I had not known I was supposed to interview them as well. These things. These people. But now that he mentioned it, I could see what a good idea it was. *Precision* would certainly lay it up like cream. And the photographs too. Before I could say anything, Franz's brother came in as feverishly as before. He gave each one of us a broadsheet on which was drawn the picture of a vagina on which was written,

'DOWN WITH THE GREAT CUNT!'

My double said to him,

'Where is that new tape recorder?'

Franz's brother looked around him vaguely. Thinking. He clicked his fingers and darted out. We waited for him in silence. He soon returned with it. I watched as my fantastic twin twiddled its knobs and then finally had it going. He motioned Franz's brother to sit down. I was rapidly going over in my mind the kinds of questions I could ask myself. I could not think of any that would not be questionable from the journalistic point of view.

But before I could say anything Franz's brother shouted into the microphone, 'DOWN WITH THE GREAT CUNT!' And looked solemnly back at me. I said,

'Testing, testing. DOWN WITH THE GREAT CUNT. Testing. One ... two ...'

I coughed, hawked phlegm and swallowed. This was crazy. A dry whirlwind was scattering my thoughts, whipping them to bits and pieces, wringing from me a great longing for everything, including life, to end. I asked the first thought that came to my head.

'Christian, what do you feel about violence?'

At that moment I could feel, could actually see Susan nervously asking me the same question. At the same time my awareness of the room I was in was brilliantly shot through with a dazzling feeling of *déjà vu*. When was it? When? What monstrous time had I encountered all this before? What wine was it that had made the moon so haunted?

'About violence? It is impossible to "feel" about violence. Impossible to "think" about violence. Of course there are degrees of violence, and kinds of violence. There is a violence in the very attempt to write in such a way that the writing is beyond thought and feeling. Personally I find that our feelings and thoughts are themselves a kind of self-violation, a self-immolation. It is this inherent quality of our feelings and thoughts which I find to be more significant than the thing thought or the thing felt. More significant because it is unmoving and permanent and has, as it were, a corporate almost archetypal solidity and its resonance has a ring that goes beyond poetry.'

'Are you saying man is naturally violent?'

His eyes glittered as he regarded the cold and implacable microphone. He clasped his hands together, resting them on his knee.

'I suppose Susan would say that the very life within us is the spark that sets creation on fire. To do anything else with life is to warp it, to deny it its mission. But as for myself, I find that simplistic. However, let's look at her proposition more closely. The development of social and national and international man is one long denial of that in you and I which Susan sees as our natural destiny. The few of us who are left still have a notion of our elemental beginnings, of those devouring sparks that give a comprehensive face to our thoughts and feelings, so we must live according to our nature and as luck would have it by so doing we actually show the rest a glimpse of their own natural destiny. Take for a moment the worn out notion of life as both flesh and spirit, both bestial and angelic, at once depraved and pure. The walker in the mud and mire gazing at the stars. One thinks of sexual and physiological and non-altruistic goings on. One thinks of anarchy. One thinks of love and health and laying down one's life for another. One *thinks* before living. That is what the world has come to. I suppose that's what Nicola meant. And the thinking itself is as it were preordained by the sum of allowable knowledge each

generation forces onto the next. This in effect means that the more we 'progress' the more we think as that progress demands and the less we think and feel as the life within us demands. All the forces of social and national man have been levelled against that tiny spark within us and seek to snuff it out with types of religion, education, legislation, codes and in the last resort, jails and lunatic asylums. The mass of men live underneath the hand of these forces. But a few of them still persevere, still implacably and at great cost to their own cherished lives, still go out there wielding the only banner, this tiny spark that will detonate all creation, and they wield it in the only manner which society cannot fail to understand. Some would say fear cleanses - Nicola does. Instil fear into society's heart and she will bare her fangs to protect her cubs. That kind of fear is not enough. It does not de-frost the chilled spark within her. Inject her here and there with this and that strange and vivid idea and at the same time make memorable lifestyles out of the ruthless destruction and she will find her own cubs come running to us. The thaw will have begun. All those Ice Ages of the heart, they will have begun to thaw. The next thing she knows - it is the flood. But of course she is herself a cunning wench. She knows when to give rein to her children, when to let them hold out their hand to the flame, for they will come back crying and there will be even more snow and ice than ever before in the space within the human heart. I tried to say something of this at the meetings but why bother? It merely throws a damper on plans that sound worldwide. In the end they will get us one way or another. I know that. To evangelize the red-hot magma that bubbles within man is not my purpose in writing. Indeed I have no purpose. I merely see things in a certain way. Just as you see them in another certain way. I should be happy here. I have this room. I have all the drink I need. But there comes over me a paralyzing and sudden vision of how barren and self-indulgent creation is, continually feeding on itself, now displaying its wounds in four dimensions, now creeping into a magnifying grandeur from which everything draws a certain significance, now settling back into the chicanery of a pointless orbit around the sun. But these moods do not last. Indeed I suppress them. Just as I have I think suppressed your question by an elaborate digression. What was it again?

'Are you saying man is naturally violent?'

'It is indeed a threefold question. Man. Nature. Violence. Three capital letters which revolve around one of their company. Man. Man defines man. Man defines nature. Man defines violence. And he is himself defined by his own definitions. Compare the violence with which stars and meteorites go out with the greatest violence man is capable of. Insignificant, is it not, that which we are capable of. Compare a ruthless murder with the sudden burgeoning of a black hole up there in the outer reaches of space. You look at a colony of spiders and two of them are fighting to the death. Or a colony of dinosaurs. Violence is relative. It is important only to those in direct and emotional contact with it. For me there is a greater violence, that of the imagination. Our dreaming and our waking life wage against each other a furious battle. Now and then one or the other triumphs but only in a pyrrhic victory. Every instant of our lives is the outcome of that struggle. Yet we retain for years on end the illusion of a linear and easily deciphered life. Writing which takes this into account pleases me. And there we have another form of violence, the type from which we derive pleasure when our perceptions are in friction with music, literature, films, paintings, sculpture. There is also the violence of a caress - what mad arousal our fingertips have! I could go on. And on. The important thing I suppose is the degree of visibility that lies between our being and our consciousness of our being. After that one can answer questions about what one feels about violence. We spend our lives as life, itself, is coming into being, coming into consciousness, and yet each day we live as though we already are, as though we already are conscious of all that consciousness involves. To sit still and then hatch out in the natural time - that would be something. But I suffer from claustrophobia, impatience. A hungering after exactly what it is outside my shell which I am breaking out into. Perhaps an eagle is circling above waiting for me to hatch. Perhaps a fox will eat me even while I am in the egg. Had I known there was sunlight out there would I have come out? The tempestuous hungering for life, urges the chick to hatch, to stretch its wings, to take that first faltering step and many days later to die of old age or to be the main dish on a critic's table.'

I asked, impatiently,
'Are you an illusion?'

He laughed. The laugh sounded real enough.

'If you prick me, I hurt. But then I am I suppose the sum of all the thoughts and delusions and feelings which I hold. In a sense I am the fiction I choose to be. At the same time I am the ghoul or the harmless young man others take me for. I am what the rock dropping on my head makes me. I am my lungs breathing. My memory remembering. My desires reaching. My audience reacting with an impatient sneer. I am all those things. Are they illusions? I do not know. And that I think is the point. That we never do know for certain. There are so many points from which different lenses are focusing upon us and we are the picture in each one of them. Those lenses may even be the several instants of our whole lives focusing simultaneously on us - creating what? A monster? A human being? A prismatic delusion? Those lenses may be the several places and spaces in which we have lingered our whole lives and in one single moment they suddenly bear down, focus upon us. It is this multiplicity of our singleness which I think gives an illusory depth to living. What we consider deep and abiding is perhaps the result of technique rather than a Creator's purpose. So much for religion. But even mathematics works from the same basic source, these underlying techniques. Man walks on the crust, the surface, and he draws conclusions that may be nothing at all. The thing that seems most real is that we are here and what we do with each other. But where we are and what we do with each other have been subjected to that sum of allowable knowledge and knowhow which diminishes the very life in us. Our material means or lack of them, our belief in this or that ideology, our needs, our wants, they take up more room in us than do humane considerations. When they do not, one, of course, is elevated into sainthood. Or trampled down. Day to day reality is therefore itself any illusion created by the mass of our needs, our ideas, our wants. Transform the needs, the ideas, the wants, and at once, as though with a magic wand, you transform the available reality. To write as though only one kind of reality subsists in the world is to act out a mentally retarded mime, for a mentally deficient audience. If I am an illusion, then that is a delusion that is very real indeed.'

'What about the workers and the peasants? Are you for them or against them? I ask this very seriously because right now there are

strikes, riots, demonstrations, bombings, and all to do with this question of transforming the nature of available reality.'

He smiled.

'More a question of transforming inequalities and salaries and housing and schools and hospitals I would think. More a question of extending to the available limit the freedoms that exist now. I wish them luck. I really do. They are not fighting for new needs, new ideas, new wants, but for what such people have always fought for. And lost. They are not really fighting. It is merely the whole society writhing as it were with indigestion or perhaps malnutrition. All they want is for the lioness to relent a little, give them a bit more rope. What they should do is kill her. But of course they always stop short of that. What I am saying is I wish them luck but they are not going far enough, not transforming the nature of available reality at all. She will perhaps give them what they want and then later she will show her fangs more exactly. More lethally.'

'Where does your terror group come in?'

'It does not come in at all on such superficial ripples. I have already told you about Susan's ideas.'

'What is the significance of the question "How is Susan in bed"?''

'Chris introduced it into the constitution. Of course it is an unwritten constitution. In fact, there is no constitution, just consensus. The trouble is that Chris can be very demoralizing unless he has a role and a routine and a code to operate by. You ignore it at your own peril. I must say, she is very good though. Do you want to ask Franz's brother anything?'

'Did your brother's death liberate you from the great cunt?'

Franz's brother let his eyes dim and glow wetly. With a quiet venom he said,

'DOWN WITH THE GREAT CUNT.'

But I refused to be sidetracked. I thrust the microphone into his face and asked:

'What is the great cunt?'

He rolled his eyes slowly until only the whites showed. He rubbed his hands together and held them out palms upward as though the

answer was contained in them. Christian, seated at the desk, leaned backwards.

'What is the great cunt?' I repeated.

Franz's brother came back from wherever his eyes had been. He said,

'It's inside you. It's everything you are. It's the soul that's inside you looking out into the world. It's everything outside yourself that looks inside you. That's the great cunt. That's the great whore. You see things and you think it's you seeing the things but all the time it's the great cunt seeing through you. You touch things and you think it's you touching things but it's the whore touching things through you. You smell things. You taste things. You hear things. But it's the great cunt smelling, tasting and hearing things through you. Do you see what I mean? Do you? You are not there and in great darkness and all at once you find you weren't there at all but in some great big womb that's going to shit you out after nine months. It weans you from things. It teaches you things. It's the very flesh that's clinging to your bones. Everything that sucks you in, draws you in, incorporates you, blinds you, all that consumes you whole. That's the cunt. And it slams like a door once you're in. It's like it is with Chris, changed him from a glittering prince to a priest of shit. And there is no other side of the coin. No, sir. There is no other end to the stick, except yourself, and the other end is buried deep inside her no matter what you do. You're dragged over hot coals of vision by that third leg. It's all things to all men, but basically we are it. We are the great cunt. Whatever you do, whatever you think, whatever you feel, whatever you aspire to, it's dictated by the great cunt. Because our actions and feelings and thoughts and aspirations are the great cunt. In fact it's the DNA in us, that great cunt. That's why when Franz died and my eyes opened - they weren't really my eyes you know - I knew what I had to do. But even the knowing what to do wasn't my own and even right now I am what the great cunt wants me to be. A kind of one-slogan agitator whose very obsession is the proof of his tolerated madness. Do you think I am mad?'

I waved my hands:

'What is madness anyway?'

'I know what it is. I'll take you there when you've finished here. It's not exactly pleasant but one eats and shits and sleeps. You're

only mad when there are other people around you, but never when you are on your own. It's people who manufacture all kinds of crazinesses, like you and me and Christian here. It always sounds like an excuse but it's true you know. Franz was really mad about it in these catacombs, these miles of old burial ground, these passageways of the great cunt. . . .'

He got up and began to fiddle with a small paraffin stove. When it was lit he put the kettle on. Christian had begun to speak:

'You don't know the history of these caves I suppose? Nobody really does. But they are prehuman. All kinds of monstrous beings used to roam in and around here, beings long since extinct: Mastodons, dinosaurs, pterodactyls, sabre-toothed tigers, mammoths. Though that perhaps is laying it on a bit thick. Anthropoids hung around shivering, begetting, dying. There is a lovely collection of remains and artifacts to attest to the fact. Bones, teeth, stone artifacts. Even a bit of pottery. But the caves are first mentioned in letters and documents of the twelfth century. There had been an epidemic of some sort, a plague. Thousands found refuge here. But Devil's End was also used as a collection point by the slave drivers. The sea is conveniently by and the caves are easily defended against attack. You can imagine the grisly goings-on. Floggings, impalings, body inspections, tortures of all kinds. Most of the grim instruments you've seen date from that period. All kinds of men found refuge here: robbers, heretics, pirates, criminals, hermits, lepers, swindlers, pariahs of all types. Now it's us. We are as it were the living memory of those centuries of nightmare. But then everybody must have roots. A sense of identity, continuity. Disease, war, persecution, rapine, these are our ancestors, you know. Fearful myths grew out of this place. Dire mythologies, and all that. And the name too helped. To visit this place is to encounter yourself as a living feverish ghost. The legends of course tend to exaggerate: cannibalism, human sacrifices, fearful ceremonies, devilry, and a hideous ignorance of humanity that borders on violent manic cunning. The place itself had become the living symbol of all human taboos. I don't suppose you believe in reincarnation? Well, we're all supposed to be actually not ourselves but some of these hideous characters who lived here in that greivous long ago. And all that. Hmm.'

Franz's brother watched the steam begin to issue out of the

kettle's spout. Christian came out of his reverie. Was there some hidden meaning in all this?

'Inevitably,' Christian continued, 'Devil's End became the rallying point for all who in any way wanted to destroy what is out there. We have made it somewhat hospitable. But this time I believe we are the tail end of that gory tradition. The army has attacked this place five times in the past three years. Each time they were repulsed. But one day they will flush us out like rats from a disused sewer. With bombs and gas. Our gas masks are rather ancient. Of course we know a useful trick or two and we do have constant patrols but I feel that . . . sure we'll go down fighting . . . but the End will come with us. We've wired the place with bombs. If they come we can lure them in here and explode the whole place. We do not have to use it any more. Our place now as you already know is not here but in the villages, in the cities. We are young, trained, and committed. Those are perhaps our very faults. I think we will do.'

Franz's brother spooned instant coffee into the cups. I seemed to have refilled my vodka glass again and again as the minutes - were they hours - passed. I was decidedly tipsy. I was seeing double images of everything. Listening to my own voice. As the hot water poured out into the cups and the teaspoon tinkled, stirring the brown-cream surface of the coffee - was it coffee - I watched the too much steam spread out and grow into the merest hint of a grinning shape. It was offering me a cup. I reached out my hand.

The cup smashing onto the floor was Katherine's face suddenly there. Angry. Her boot kicked Franz's brother out of the room. The twisted broken glass staring at me were her two disgusted eyes peering earnestly into the pupils of my eyes. I felt all at once like soft clay which a liquid from those piercing eyes was gradually kneading and kneading. At the same time my head and nerves seemed to radiate a phosphorescent shimmer of energy making me at once intensely alive and yet physically unable to do anything but slowly collapse into the floor which was suddenly not there. Her arms were under my armpits. Her face so hideously close to mine had shaped itself into a lurid and stern horror. The white teeth seemed to gush out of the too red gums as she screamed:

'SUSAN SUSAN SUSAN!'

A pale red tongue lashed in through the door. Took one look. Exclaimed:

'MOTHERFUCKING SHIT WHAT HAPPENED?'

'Help me get him out of here.'

My shoulders - were they still there - sank into a pair of hairy clinging claws. My feet were viciously grasped in the steely vice of those two eyes of burning coals. Heaving towards the gigantic Moloch mouth with its huge black fat lips peeled back over the gaping rows of small sharp irregular teeth. As I passed through, they clamped shut transfixing me at the hips. I heard my pelvis crack and I screamed and screamed. The rough slimy tongue waddled me onto the huge molars and as they came down to chew me, the power of their coming ripped out all screaming from my deepest phosphorescence. The telex in my mind had stuck at one phrase and all it was meticulously sending out over and over were the two words JONAH COMPLEX. Jonah complex. Swallowed alive by the great cunt. The fucking search. The basic experiment. The dance of the blind. The terror of the inside view. The huge molars hardly crushing down until no trace of black sunlight remained. This was where Chris had discovered the truth of excretion. She had stolen into his room as he slept with his arm over his face. She had uncovered him and got in beside him. When he woke up it was too late and he was inside her fighting he knew not what. She wrestled him deeper and deeper into her, grinding him with her hips. Until he shrieked as though the guts had been spiked out of him. And through his choking stinging sweetness he heard her silent multitude of screams as she bit and ripped at him with her lips and teeth. In the silence that followed, he lay in her arms weeping, and she held him tightly. The silence was the first person singular. A small noise in a long thin tunnel. A single bright eye blazing at me. A thought, very red-hot. Savaging him with its sound: mother, mother. From its remote and hazy line I looked back quickly. Seeing the small clean pink drops of memories. Tiny pink drops, like minute rubies, clinging to the quartz of thoughts. Grazed my brain. And from deep down there my overarching yearning for a single glittering drop to sizzle the hot stony tongue. Language. Knotted tightly around my eyes like a bandage made of headaches. Language. Shards of a broken glued-together mirror. In it knotting my tie. English images came out of the barn with a

thousand Zulus at my heels. She found me wedged tightly between past and present. I held my breath. I held my thoughts. I held my emotions tightly. Soon, a single footprint appeared. Language. Big heavy words thumping onto my coffin. A fly on the distant window-pane turned its back on the proceedings of man. The chameleon stalking it waited for its chance. A lean and hungry youth raised a brick. An instant later both fly and chameleon squelched. I looked at the deadly shadow of a tiny daisy where a man with a camera looking up from the darkness saw patterns of stars. The editor shook his head saying: 'The Sordid Joe case is closed - I cannot print this.' I came out into the street seeing only what a desert it was. I do not mean the way things happen. What a desert it was except for the scathing winds blowing from Devil's End. What a desert it was except the motionless pace that accelerated from Devil's Peak. Marie screamed when he told her. Stephen ground his teeth when he tried to tell him. His aunt stared back at him seeing only the unreason of rock. 'It's the times,' she explained to Marie. I smeared a sample of humanity onto the sheet of glass and inserted it underneath the powerful microscope. What I saw turned my hair white. When I touched my head, I felt the iron grit of Devil's Peak. The music plunged into my heart like a red hot knife. A severe frost was crying over the desert. A severe frost of language that could not sharpen the edges of the vision. It was not an eclipse of the sun but an eclipse of humanity. It was the most spectacular special effect any god could even think about. Beginning first at the edges, like a ring that gradually contracts into its own centre. And at the same time beginning at the centre, then spreading outwards towards the rim of all that was humane. The course of history. It was all a desert and Devil's End was the only Sordid Hope. Like Sordid Joe. I closed my mouth tightly like a man who has much to say. The grape was bitter on the tongue. The whole nation was a desert parked solid in a ripe grape that was bursting with decadent but sweetish liquid. Pink liquid. Pink liquid drops that he pricked with a needle from the big and Hemingway fish that was the mote in his eye. Tiny rubles of it were strung around Marie's neck of blindness like a necklace noose. A man must work once he is thrown out of Eden. There is no soul! The boy once cried but the aunt savagely turned the key that gritted his teeth. A tiny cactus, with bright yellow flowers, sprouted from

his navel. I was the distant speck that suddenly blocks out the sun. A small noise in Blanche's mousehole. The cats of the house lurked nearby. Finally the desert drove me out and the last I saw of myself was just before the cats tore him to pieces. As the hangman pressed the lever, the door opened and mother came in. She had a whip in her hand. And she hit him. Whipped him 'to have more sense'. I came out a man who was the shadow of himself. Even this was an insult to shadows. 'Love? I have nothing but a bad testimonial to give it,' the boy said thoughtfully. It was like tearing out sanity from a deep rock. A dynamite charge could not even scratch the surface. The editor crunched out his cigar and said: 'You're useless!' When I came out into the sun I bumped into myself coming to explain and explain all over again. 'Sorry,' I said to the woman I had knocked down. It was Blanche Goodfather. The undergraduates showered us with pages torn out of Montaigne's Essays. The pink champagne in my glass was the red desolation that was a sky above and a fiery pit below. The sound of scuffling in the big wardrobe was Blanche's new friend caught on the big mousetrap. The little noise far down at the end of the street was myself fighting back the rising breakdown. There was a member of parliament at the bottom of the garden. It was a statue by Rodin. Actually a key. It had sharp fragments sticking out of it. One stuck into my thumb. I saw the pink drops on the floor. I curled my lip around the bright red petals and licked them dry. There was nothing left but the polished desert of the floor. On which I walked with Susan towards Devil's End. The spots of blood were turning into poems that blinded anyone who looked at them without a smoked glass. When Susan's shoulder opened there were, in the veins, symbols trying to find the light at the end of the tunnel. It was my aunt's red-hot eyes. They had imprinted in them the words from the Song of Songs. How beautiful it was! But she turned ugly and wrinkled and I patted the filled-up grave with a rusty spade. A republic of deadly bacillus was lurking at the cemetery gate. Synonyms came out of the barn with a mass of snakes at their heels. The world was like an invisible bandage around their language. This startling universe of just one thing after another. 'What do you write about?' the journalist asked. I shrunk, becoming a gold speck frozen all night in the human fridge. 'You write about Africa?' he insisted. But I grew even smaller and tinier until a blink could have swatted

me out of his eye. He rubbed at the irritation with the hard knuckles of his hand. I grinned suddenly and turned my back on him. 'Pompous bastard,' he muttered. Elsewhere in the room, Blanche lurked behind a tulip which my desert had killed. A film of perspiration had broken out at the end of her almost transparent nose. But her eyes lit up when her new friend sauntered into the room. Watching all this from the shortening distance of my walk towards them, I sipped at the pink champagne and sailed on its placid sea until I was there where they were at the end of my telescope. How tedious the flesh is. 'Have you got the key,' she asked. I gave it to her. And she crossed the desert of our vows with her new friend. Watching them, I made slits of my eyes until I could see a speck where they had once been. I was looking down into the pond. The speck had caused the slightest ripple on the surface of my feelings. Watching them go. Their speck becoming an air bubble slowly floating up from the desert to the shock of my face and white hair. Silver fish gleamed on the basket left on the deserted pier. Their eyes had become transformed. They blazed with death. It was the matches that gave me the idea. The Blanche haystack instantly went up in flames. I threw myself into the roaring fire to silence the desert. I almost split open out of myself. It was so scaring. But gradually I became composed. I looked up from the pink champagne. There was the same journalist, saying: 'You may be a writer but you are still as coal black as I am.' I smiled down at him a whole sahara of feeling and turned on my heel. But a thorn stuck into his foot. The boy limped heavily and sat on a stone. The little blood that trickled out was like a sunset on a murderous day in Kampala. Life bleeds drop by drop till there is nothing but a hard gnarled shell. I dug out the thought with a pin. It was as if the world was being dragged tooth and nail out of him. How the sky behind it all bled visions! I could see how if I moved at all it would tilt the balance and the moment would be lost forever. But this very thought itself made the rabbit jump straight into the bush. Disappointed I walked around my guests. Inspecting my face for signs of life. Satisfied, I came among my guests like a man who has returned from the grave to complain about the death certificate. But they had seen nothing wrong, only the grey haired young man who once had gained some notoriety. The shark in the aquarium can be watched even by children and priests.

The cobra in the pit was part of a tourist's hectic coach tour. The plastic man! Planted in a bowl filled with the barren soil of an Oxford degree. Making the monkey monkier. Erasing the solidity out of him to make him no more than a black insider. There was the typewriter. There were the cameras. Would I go out like the last speck of a spectacular fireworks display of unending conferences on Black Culture? Everything else had been drained out of him. Leaving only the paranoid mirage of the desert. But this last book - it would break the hinges off all the doors they had locked in his teeth. The last indelible memory would be the assassin's knife plunging and twisting into his heart, where the desert hurt. The face at the window would be gaunt, the look of every mother. At dinner the boy asked:

'What does it mean to be poor?'

'Going to bed under a bush without your dinner.'

The next night he neither came for his dinner nor for his bed. They searched for him all night. He walked in calmly at breakfast. Stephen watched as she whipped me. I wanted to tell her that he had done nothing except be poor that last night of expectations. But I just licked the blood sipping from the corner of his mad mouth. In the playground I watched a hungry boy watching an itinerant fly with the interest of a gourmet. I circled round him once, twice, and found myself standing before the journalist and looking down at him with sudden interest. 'We were at school together once,' I said. But the journalist curled his lip around the statement and saw the playground and the well-fed boy who watched him secretly. Then he stood up and ignoring my thin proffered hand stalked away. The speck that had blocked the sun moved a little and a sudden chink of brightness illuminated my soul. The cough came out of the darkness and hit me until I was awake. They are clearing me from their throats, spitting me out. The Boeing 747 was a cinder in the shimmering violet of the sky. Up there. When I called the air hostess for pink champagne, it tasted like blood. Drained out of myself. How willingly I had led myself to the slaughter, to the typewriter. Yet I could not live like one who has to feel the tempo, read the pace. How badly things had turned out. In a single year. Blanche could become such a bitter and unloving person without the slightest provocation. What made her so terribly human was that in fact provocation had

nothing to do with it. The sun was right. The clouds were right. Day after day she was in that nightmarish kitchen of hashish, exploding with woe, glee, boredom, sudden bursts of zeal. And the desert was slowly translating me into a man who could not possibly exist. Those cameras, that typewriter, they were the speck between myself and the full pulsing blaze of the sun. The shark had suddenly swerved from out of the blue when I levelled my shotgun and the blood and guts of it boiled insanely around her nude swimming figure and she was crying out curses about how I should have let the shark live and shot her instead. And I rose from the microscope and from the terrible vision the boy had seen. At the reception there were only mouths eating, masticating, their tongue and molars going BLANCHEBLANCHEBLANCHE. The abrupt bursting out of a wild duck aroused the boy from his thinking of the world. A giant man soaring under a tiny mushroom. The boy asked,

'Is cruelty a human characteristic?'

But she was busy writing her speech for the Women's Institute. And did not answer. But as she was going out she said:

'Animals do not know what it is to be cruel. They are just themselves.'

Men knew things but in spite of that they were cruel. A car backfired but he could not place the figure of the insider inside it. A cave-man in a hairshirt said it was Thomas More. The black night out there was wedged solidly underneath the door. It banged against the sound of my feverish typing. I expected the blow which did not come when I opened the door. There was a man and a woman screwing the devil out of each other. They fell into the room abruptly. They did not even look up. I was already at the telephone dialling the police when they finished and stopped me with a look. The man shook his head sadly, saying: 'You're a brother. We're your people, man.' Blanche had come down. High on hashish. I locked the door after them and returned to the typewriter. If black characters really talked in a ridiculous lofty rhetorical style as in the historical novels . . . these worded and unplanned encounters with the brothers! I remembered how an ex-friend had tried more or less the same thing. Saying: 'Can't you talk in our own language any more?' And I had felt the bayonet of the injustice pin me to a wall made up of all the cheques I had cashed and the life I lived with Blanche. The

interview had ended suddenly because I shook myself from my chair and stared at the television camera and nodded grimly and then with my whole foot kicked it in smashing the picture from all those screens in the basements, drawing-rooms and penthouses out there. I paid for the damage and retreated into the no-man's-land behind the typewriter. I could not stand the way my own people can become the nails transfixed in my gut. It was this I had cleared from my throat and spat into my handkerchief to find it full of blood. Humanity forgotten, so early in my life, so late in my learning. The tiny drops were embossed into the rudimentary jewellery of reality. The sequence of the destined-universe was not the same as that of man's fate. The two were indelibly bent on a collision course. When I looked up into her face in which her eyes were long and slitted to reveal how distant she had become I saw how I had seen her: upright, slim, intelligent, dressed in the formal dress of the glittering occasion. The palm trees in her face confronted the Atlantic Ocean and the boy could not tell how the geophysical continental-drift theory had affected man. The sound of a drill hammering away at the tense sea grinded out teethsparks. Achilles come up to converse with Tiresias. As I went down, the black sunlight of my life flushed through my mind. Down, deep down to the breath making miles above my head. As the tiny airbubble burst on the surface, directly below, her breath jumped. I landed in an untidy heap of dark light. 'This is how people suffocate!' she said. When he had fainted and she was still strangling him harder and harder I came out and knocked her down reviving myself from the memory. From that remote time I see her slitting her eyes and I made a sick face. Eating the salad of my brain. Red hot thoughts blowing from the desert. The universe full of bad news. There sunbathers slowly roast themselves in the full glare of my nerves. Life was business and one never talked shop. The bangle on her wrist was the mark of the uroboros. The sea ringed round the dry land. The glint of music glittered from it with a drear pessimism. I could not believe my ears for the noise of myself trying to outshout the silence. The lethal impassivity of the pen and the camera lens crushed me like an avalanche of rock and ice. Truth was never the best foot to limp on. Towards the long, long words of air deep down above. Seeming a beautiful inscrutability. Curt greetings and curt nods. Raving, blind drunk, greeting him. Encouragement

before stunning insight. Hysterical letters. Terrifying the poor sod out of his talent. Mail that never arrives. Human wounds bleed visions. A state of emergency distasteful to him. The boy closed the encyclopaedia whose print was the reality around him. Dressed up all at once as an adult. My head broke surface. The sun had jumped behind a fiery bush of cloud. Fierce rays, vermillion, in vivid columns streaked upward into the sheer clarity of space. Firing atoms of sorrow.

Eight

It had, that one year with Blanche, broken up and burst into flames and nothing had been recovered, not a foot, not an arm, not a leg. The year with Goodfather had been erased as suddenly and indelibly as I who had entered it. Staring blindly at the book. Hammered to the stout wooden door. A hollowness carved out of her heart, the whip and substance of myself, this retching sound of food moving down her gullet into the large folds of the stomach; the sickening whisper of time being absorbed into my blood and of the ideals being pushed down into her gut ready to be excreted. Sitting bolt upright like one whose spine had never bowed to the dictates of destiny. A stain of horror inside me, an inky blackness, stretched tightly across the sky. Locked in a suitcase. Retched all my years, seeing a great stain of life. A chill in the sheets. Spiked out of him. A terrified ghostly shape, cringing into the trees. The wine shrank into a tiny red bead, a strange rufescent glow through the darkest roots of the small hours. Two coming together like iron and flint are only able to give out sparks. She smiled thinly, that thin nightgown conscience, a shadow at his feet. What a sharp tang it was to taste of its bitterness. He had spat blood again in the toilets. Unmovable, anvil-hammered tongue! Wiping the bile from his lips, he blacked out in the middle of a speech. Out of the ground to the sea by means of the force of gravity. The guest of an inhuman geology. An starvistic grace dogged him with the strange amalgam of pity and terror which Aristotle laid down. Railway lines on which all locomotives are supposed to run. Bringing me round again to see the distorted twisted two-

headed shape that was Susan and Katherine vainly reviving me. Carving Chris and his underwear. Franz's brother. Scorching the madness out of me by another showdown. Bleating my neuroses out with an incredible anthem. Now, the first grimness showing its teeth through the brain that ticked inside, the lives stuffed and squelched inside the machinery: how open to the spark was I? That strain too sordid to bear. Reality. A thousand little fires prickled the chambers of the heart. Ground glass in thoughts. Listening. With deft reflexes, the beginning of those nights and days. Blown out when it was burning the fingers. Retching out guts. The sun frozen bright and hard in the hands. Red hot arrows of pain left minute cracks on the shells of the eggs in the fridge. Listening. Dead drunk in shantytown. Inflicting illusion upon reality. But strabbing the thought out, remembering her as a silent and scourged girl. Marie ... in a pink dress. A desert I had never thought to find in another. Awaiting the prodigal. A blinding flash, that shook the house, lit her cigarette. About her, determined disappointment crashed it out. For the purposes of study. With every right 'to find himself' he fought back onto the straightlines of a precarious sanity. Nodding absently as though it was a new way of saying goodbye, driving away 'the state of the world'. Swerved. Sick with myself. Perishables, she had said, perishables! The beginning of a new madness. Damped in technological style. Too headachy for the boy washing his lips. Grinding my teeth: SUSAN.

A black sky filled in by the hard edges of black sunlight. A sweet loathing, imperishable, turned the head towards hate. Was that judgement? These great teeth! A distant enigma shook its searing heat. Brawling around my memory. Sniffing and snuffling. Its head and mane as though greatly listening. 'Give me fire,' I said. Blazed with the strange excruciating madness. Stricken, the slightly glistening carpet of water. Unglued my eyes from it. In a moment fast asleep. Paralysed. Teardrops. They rolled down like boulders causing an avalanche. Crushed him with rock and ice. A vegetation of good intentions streaked past the speeding train. Dry and brown. A single match could have set them all alight. Unglued my stomach from it. To do and to be - was that the same thing? In this, one thing after another. All perishable as the eyes that perceived it. There was no immortal ore anywhere in the rock of the intellect. Neither was it

there in the coalface of the emotions. Roused in him extreme feelings of dread. Paranoia. Then, death had no part in my plans, a tireless seeking out. Crunched into myself. Checking that the door was securely locked to keep out demons. And crowded out any thought of ideas ever truly changing in the world. A new bottle from my rucksack. This wrinkled curl of the lip around the rim of squalor. The perpetual confusion. The tickets to nowhere. Squelched together in waiting rooms. Their sudden look of hostility, the unrefutable sneer. And the ghastly shape was a living thing. In an instant it could bare its teeth, its soldiers, its police, its informers, its paymasters. Grinding exceeding small. It whipped up into the air tiny cinders of lives, it flicked them hither and thither, blowing the ashes of want. A mass of tiny poisonous worms. Come together for some bendish rite. Their myriad tiny droppings falling out of the sky and sticking everything with a hideous glue. I went under, held my breath, watched everything. Until I could have burst wide open out of myself. That dark nebulous presence, fleshy, mushy. A spongelike being sucking lives. Foamed and frothed night and day. In the dark seemed to gleam with its own human-greased black sunlight. When it rained, the water came down black and corrosive. Brought down with it the viscid curdled thing. A mucus fog, a bloodclotted phlegm in my boyhood's throat. In dreams the raindrops fell like crystals in a pellucid stream. Liquid gems that fell down unsolicited from the wonder of illusion. On impulse, and so quickly gobbled down. An uneatable thing. Like newly formed rock. Ah, stainless rain! Pale watercolour blue the rim of the madness. Discursive and open, an indifferent astonishment. Kicked hard, back to its side of the stream. These greenmetal sides of the world. Dry and clean inside the atmospheric waterproof skin of black sunlight. Where white pebbles gleam on a slight gradient of bedrock. But Lucretius beckoned him back. This change in me. More than all the darkness the bright sun could think of. The house grim and alert with Marie's blindness. My own flesh could think in it. This precision of a camera. Decapitated. Howled till the whole house rang. A thin sound swung down. Brusquely cut short. Cut in half by the redhot bullets. The headlights of a car swung across the house and the minister fumbled for her keys and not finding them tried the door and walked in surprised that it was not locked. Her

headless body faltered at the third step. The head flew out the open doorway. Thudded against the gate.

Thick rags of cloud quickly flew to screen it out. Watching Susan adjust the powerful binoculars. The radio beside her tuned to the police channel. She swept aside the leaves and stalks of grass. Settled her elbows comfortably before raising the binoculars to her eyes. Soon she saw what she expected to see and began to assemble the powerful rifle. She cleaned the smudge from the telescopic sight and once more brought it to bear on the almost stationary target. The silencer muffled the single burst of fire. The simultaneous whirring of my camera. The sound flashed through the house like a bolt of ice. Wedged between mind and matter. With no substance in either. A wedge driven in between the underneath of past and present. Like a glowing cigarette touching my heart. Cold fingers clatching at thoughts. Drained of life, those hooks of them. Squatting on their heels. The new moon, a fleck wet and brilliant, sharply outlined the ominous strands of cloud, hot embers that popped and crackled. A hand turned them over. In the black doorway, creation's gut flashed anew. This unnameable contempt. The size and bulk of a grown man's thigh. Plunged too suddenly. Money - the new stinking idea. A large deep hole in a rippling sea. The whiplike tentacle lashed out, dragged me kicking into her abyss. The huge blunt-faced machine. Grew hotter and hotter, belched at shorter and shorter intervals. The dark grumous steam. The explosion blew the roof of the head into the sky. Lethal blades of fire tore through the intellectual metal. Tons of shredded steel and cerebral girders rained down from the sky. Steam and boiling water gurgled, roared my angry hisses. The whole structure of the sky came down like a massive punch. Crunched to nothing the eerie debris of reality. The silence was like a sudden attack, a stunning grievous assault. The sudden blow, lit up starkly in my lens swelled like a spluttering star. This live electricity called silence. Whirring the camera, and I had ceased to exist. It stretched me out, laid bare all the basic experiment that was there. Had the incision gone deeper than there was to cut through I . . . A film of blood between the thoughts and the world out there - blotted something out.

Something that made Blanche and Marie stone-mouthed. Which I avoided.

The chaos between causes and effects.

Making the boy curl his lip in disdain. Dispassionate disdain. For a long beaming moment he held them all in the minute speck of his myopic headache. Bared shoulders, elegant shirtfronts. The smile was thin and grateful. As though a nail was deeply transfixed in her chest. Who visibly flinched? A wave of peaceful dissonance bombarded his whole being. An ease and delicacy of line. The falcon beat its wings of cymbals. A muted intensity. The clear and lucid minutes seized him by the hairs. They flashed distinctly through his being like radiowaves beamed from the speck of a remote star. What an eternity was parked in every instant of it! Perishable yes; but unbearable. I stood before it, abashed, distressed, pained. I leaned forward. It was old and transformed, as though something essential had been erased from it. Subtracted from him. The creases around her mouth tightened as though a line had to be drawn somewhere. Drawn irresistibly to shadow, suggestion, a vivid openness. Turned upside down his days. Asleep at first light. Awake when the black sunlight poured mightily over the afternoon's precipice. That glittering almy mass. Those innermost impulses, the springs of thought, depressed him mightily. Veiled. Tutored against. Pressed down into the bottom of reality's barrel. Iron filings that clung to his nature as though to a magnet. With all the force of a misunderstood fear. An unnameable error shrunk the mountain in him to a tiny, finely cut diamond that hurt with each slight movement. Above him, the dirty glutinous debris. A brain mixed with grit and ground into mincemeat. Flying grit cracked the lens's insight. The small hard stones of a grimmer reality had smacked straight upwards into the microscope's lens making him wince. Startled. Staring with fascinated horror. The strange fever screamed through his gritted teeth. Knees to chin, elbows to sides, fists clenched over greying eyebrows. The slightly open mouth out of which the whole massive sky had been expelled, banged and rattled out of him. Jarred. That hard sinking feeling. Out of his hands. Stamped her foot. Atomic bombs primed to explode. In the eerie flash of the photographer's camera, the sneer was as large as the jaws of a shark. When it came out on newspaper, in the concentrated black dots of the late edition, the banner headlines screamed out the sound that had stuck in her throat. Dredged up and revealed. Was this the gap between

intelligence and mass terror? A shoe crashed through the TV screen. I limped to the phone but the voice at the other end said sarcastically:

'We were at school together remember?'

I limped into the kitchen.

Blanche had gone.

A note.

Slammed the rising breakdown backwards. A window shattered downstairs. The rock smashed Blanche's flower vase. A hail of stones showered upon the house. Cries of:

'REDS OUT! REDS OUT!'

Notebooks. Portable typewriter. I am getting out of here. Like good old Blanche. BLANCHE.

Resoundingly:

'REDS OUT!'

I raced to the garage. Smashed the typewriter across three faces. Hurling it at a looming figure. Jumped into the Land-Rover. A shower of glass rained on me. A brick thrudded against my shoulder. I slammed the car backwards. Heard a crunch and a scream. On two screaming wheels swerved into the driveway. Banged, numbed by salvos of brick and rock thudding into the car. The hairs on my head, with sudden shock of headlights, picked up the angry gesticulating crowd. Rocks and bricks thrown head on into the windscreen. Stamped the accelerator to the floorboards. Teeth bared, the wheel rigid, the engine screamed. The windscreen burst. BLANCHE! Half my face seemed to have peeled away. Missiles flying straight into my face. From the crowd transfixed by my lights right in the centre of the road. It seemed they would not budge. The howling crowd, at the last possible instant, parted. The whole body of the car thundered and groaned beneath the beating. Only for a moment. I was through - BLANCHE - THROUGH! and the road was clear back to the grim blindness. The crowd with a bellow bent its rage upon the house. The rear lights a single speck in the asphalt distance. Only then did I think of the cameras. Could I have stood my ground and calmly photographed the carnage? I kicked the ball harder, slammed it back toward the impressive wall. BLANCHE. The spasm flashed through his head like a small but dazzling searchlight. It was gone.

It made my skull so tight I woke up grinding a scream.

There was Susan. One-eyed. A bright penetrating narrow beam of light probing into my own.

Ah, Polyphemus.

Wine-soothed. A kennel inside. Not really there. Like all the moods he drew and portrayed on paper. Whatever the place; whatever the time; whatever the pace; whatever the tempo.

Utterly outside himself. The ice and the snow. The heat and the sands. Urrzly outside. Himself. Shriekily held down by Susan. To remember. Perhaps snatch a victory. But the armed horries of language. Their articulate cartridges. With axes to confirm them. Reason and knowledge the bodies in the mass graves. Meaning killed by utterance. By the sunsets in a single mind's derangement. More things in the mirror than should be reflected back. A matter of the head and not the temperature of the blood. Miles of books in such awe. A gangrene in the house. Bloodstains, scraped from underneath uluru's cars, squelch with meat. Pulling the mind down to the barometer of the senses. This grey wetness of clouds in the brain. On my mad lips a rain of Graeco-Roman stains. Backs to the wall looks at the future. That's boxing me in. The exile takes himself with him. This heavy baggage of himself. A drawing erased by persistent winds. Propelled by sorrow. Lingers in village or city. Struck down by life's own weight. With none exempt. Something more than my hand when I shake your hand. Out of the rain pluck a harvest. Cares are left with the coats hanging on a nail. The black constellations bruise and press upon the mind's house, sculptures of an inflexible mind. Like a slingshot against a wall, the man cracks. A bright curtain of blood veiled the sun. Firing salvo after salvo at Devil's End. Blasted life's boundaries. Pinned to the fear of what would happen next. The wind and the dust grind out the tears. Tanks ground out all sound of cockcrow. Behind the glowing cigarette is this mind calculating its chances. Whispers scratched afloat. Clenched their minds. Past dreams were thrown out by the bucket. Solitary obsessions, cooled, analysed the terrible crystal. Hunger in the mind was a sword being sharpened. A gun being oiled. It smashes into the hill tearing tree trunks as though they were twigs. Blasts the granite as though it was clay. Shell after shell ploughs the now silent hill. Bombers thunder by. Unless their lethal sticks.

Creeping forward on their bellies. Creak their necks to peer at the human paste. A room no man ever built with his own madness. Thinking is speeded up to outwit the bullet to come. Blazing like a napalm-holy ghost. Seeing the world through a film of pink champagne.

A red and vivid moon peeps from the horror. Troubles spread out to cover the whole table. The snake with its tail in its own mouth. The sea forever with itself around the dry land. 'The British approved Uburn as they approved the Titanic and the Bishop knew it,' Stephen said. Spun the webs that made dying an experiment. A fierce moon was shining unnaturally through the noon's black skin. Every thought outpaces itself, even as it is overtaken by its own new illuminated being which in turn outpaces itself. Out of the black sunlight, a mother engorges herself on the foetus screaming out of her. It silenced the light, froze it hard and black until its sharp bright edges cut deep into his heart. Human eyes had the same hard and dark glittering, the same refrigerated look. Which never quite looks anyone in the eye.

Susan's single hypnotic eye. Excavating into me.

Excavating.

The excretion.

'What has not been done in the name of some straitjacket?'

My soul a neat shirtfront; these star-studded galaxies. Ashtrays on the desk overflow with stubbed inventions. Night and sky are the refugees on the quay; the world debris piled at the edge of neat memoranda. White pebbles on a white beach dazzle the eye towards the lighthouse; a spurt of flame is the whiteman shooting grouse. Orion smiles at cracked tiles on Brixton roofs. The mirror flinches. Torn commandments of clouds shroud the sky from me. Time and space enclose me in their fetid rooms. The mind that is a gangrene in the house. This green foliage of minutes and thorns. These possibilities that, after Blanche, bled through incisions in the dark skin of the sky. The bounded thoughts that begin at home. Undignified. Adrift. Cartaway. Mere life-debris. The whole a thick bandage around his eyes. And burnt the humanity out of a man. The way to Hell paved by good intonations. Life takes on a bright golden glow. 'Be Star-Bright!' The chasm of rock and ice smashed upwards to meet me. The shrill cry of horror from my lungs still echoes from

every point and even came up from below to yell into my ears. I smashed onto the rock ledge and, as I clutched at it wildly, I was relentlessly rolled and scooped over the edge. The bones of my left arm hung out in splinters through the torn bloodstained fabric. As I fell, my eyes gradually grew bigger and bigger until the whole void of rock and ice chipped into them. The tough cloth, shredded to ribbons, whipped angrily at my back. The broken rope whistled upright behind me. At my back Devil's Peak. Below, the icy seas . . . Icarus. Whose great wings beat the brass of the mighty wind and like some inconceivable symphony rose upward towards the unrefusing core of the man. The unimaginable brightness of black sunlight. Pulsing at the same pace as his own heart. In him was light, fiercely consuming himself and all around with the grim fact of existence. Writhed in black oily tar-moil. The centuries, like a stiff breeze, sang through his great rigid wings. That hard and gleaming sphere in which the earth freezes ever . . . above me the void reached towards the remotest speck of infinity. Towards which he now beat his wings furiously. Tenaciously. Towards that hard invisible shell of silence. The missing link. Froze the mind into a hard brightness. It racked out of him a painless unutterable word. Rang out the hideous insane laughter like beaten brass across the heavens. Illimitable void. The whole world ripped open. He crunched into the rock like a hammer swung down hard against a diamond surface. The mind reeled with the enormity. The dazzling black concussion shooting out of my nerves. With last screech heard:

'FUCKING TERRS!'

Before the juddering plunge.

The fire which was dying out was rekindled. Heavy camouflage uniforms and the squat, blackened faces loomed in the hazy small hours. A cock crowed. The sudden coughing and spitting ended. Another sleeping shape turned over muttering something. The voices rasped. Froze. Swelled out. The thick grey bush pressed all round. In its shadows huddled the dusty bleeding prisoners. The flames crackled, and cracked sparks. Behind the glowing cigarette, the commandant's mind clicked into sudden wary alarm. A snapping twig? The strangeness of that last owl hoot? The small scuffling flight of that dislodged rock? Too late his shout roused the sleeping camp. Susan's abrupt enfilade riddled his chest, blasting

him backwards, his gun still firing. Lethal bursts gleamed rapidly in the weak morning light. The startled sleepers never knew what hit them. One, fatally wounded, crawled forward until Katherine's grenade tore him into the fire. As his clothes began to burn, a figure dashed out of the bush, the arm in a forward sweep, tossing another grenade. Chris. The rattle of automatic fire could not drown the grunts and yells. Exploded. And as suddenly as it had begun, the sound of battle ceased. They found me among the other prisoners. Old, dirty, out of my mind from the blows. As Susan untied my hands and feet I asked her, 'How's Ginger?'

And she, flatly, replied,
'He's dead.'

Nine

Katherine could alter a face into anything. This skill she acquired before she 'changed'. Her father, a teacher, had conventional plans for his only daughter. She did not so much play with her dolls as try to alter their looks. When something in a doll's face defied all her efforts she would fly into a tantrum and with any heavy thing bash in the unlucky face. Smash it until it no longer existed, even in bits and pieces. She was not very bright at school and her father soon agreed to enroll her in a dubious establishment where she would train as a cosmetician. Everything went well. Indeed she was the most brilliant student at Montini's. She had the eye, the hands, the intricate sense of touch, harmony, composition - all this without that irrepressible sense of flourish which can destroy a whole morning's work. She graduated, but only just, after having had the threat of expulsion hanging over her head. Her crime had been - frustrated by the specimen human face that confronted her in the first part of the examination - grievous facial assault. The unlucky person had been quizzed by a fat cheque from Katherine's father. After that the new cosmetician set up practice on her own and guarded against any other such incident by simply turning away the kinds of faces which infuriated her. Her reputation soared. She became 'exclusive'. Sordid Joe, then a handsome young doctor, had his practice next door. They could not fail to meet. The two were soon much in each other's company. The one spent her days confronted by the expensive and repulsive faces of unlikeable women who wanted to look likeable. The other spent his days fighting the increasing ousages that

was rising between his own undoubted and brilliant skill and the loathsome unassailability of his clients; for his too were only the rich.

I returned from Oxford with my camera and typewriter. Marie, with whom I had regularly communicated, was still single, indeed had filled out in the necessary places and flattened in the other necessary places. My head still reeled from Blanche's casual treachery. Soon the foursome was made. We had a double wedding. I took photographs; they must still exist those wedding photographs. The one sour note was Stephen. He made it clear that he deeply resented my feelings for his sister. But he did not become violent and never referred to the matter unless he had one of his 'attacks' as he would describe them after they had passed. He had a passion for Marie which I understood only too well from our childhood. Nobody quite knew what business Stephen was involved in. One day it was 'Consultant', another day it was something at the Stock Exchange. Whatever it was required much travelling in and out of the country. Later I discovered that he dealt in weapons: rifles, grenades, pistols, gas canisters, machine guns. In fact anything that could be stolen from the army. It was not much of an army but it was very well equipped, perhaps deliberately so. In fact, it was over-equipped. There we were, the five of us...

And there was Nick and Susan, shacking up here, there, everywhere.

And there was Patricia, fucking anything in sight.

Sometimes I think we were the wrong people in the right minds. In the wrong place at the right time.

We were Franz, and his brother. Probably called Fred.

There was Nicola campaigning against minds, against all thinking. That lethal intellect.

There was ...

And I get the eerie feeling.

Chris.

Christian.

The right people arrived in the wrong bodies. That ought to be me. No - that one. Fucking Christ! Will you shut up!

I was thinking of all this while waiting for Susan. My cigarette remained unlit. The Roman Catholic Cathedral towered above my stolen mini. When I peered at my face in the rear-view mirror I could

not recognize myself. That shock of white hair. Those too red brown eyes. Black eyebrows—

The nun walked slowly, thoughtfully towards the car. I opened the door. We drove away.

'What was I saying?'

I did not look at her.

'There is no God. There are no gods,' I said.

'And quite right, too.'

I grinned: 'Quite.'

'What's with you?' She demanded.

'Nothing.'

'Moods can be gods too if you let them,' she said. 'They should be done away with. Nick could never master his moods. He thought it's poetry to give your moods free rein. It isn't, you know. These things for instance ...'

She gestured back at the Cathedral,

'Thrive on our inability to master our own moods. Do you see?'

I nodded. Turned down Forster Avenue where the rival Cathedral was.

'Are you paranoid?' She asked, her hand on my knee.

I shook my head. If I was then, Christ! What it must be like not to be? Moods.

'Anyway, I'll be back soon.'

She was gone before I even felt the kiss. I watched her walking up the steps to the great doors carrying her lethal bag. I looked at my watch. What if she blew herself up? I adjusted the rear-view mirror and stared at myself. And brushed a speck from my dog collar. I definitely looked the part. The reverend part. As she did too. With those timebombs. And Marie had not detected any change in me. Or had she? But really there had been no change because I am what I already was. Each instant. There is this phone booth. I could already feel the crunching sound of it being wrecked. And all those shop windows. A mere brick would shape them into beautiful random patterns. Christ! This is sheer vandalism.

'What did you say?'

She had climbed in, was throwing the now empty bag into the back. Slammed the door.

'I was thinking aloud.'

'It's like college,' she said as I drove away. 'Vandalism is only a first degree. If you graduate in it with honour you have the opportunity to research further and further. My father, the one who fucked me, he was ...'

'I don't want to know.'

She smiled: patted my hand.

'That's more positive,' she said. 'People never assert themselves. You could say vandalism is a mature course in assertiveness. A fist through the window of the void.'

We were about to pass by a Hamburger Joint.

'We'll leave it here,' she said.

We walked home solemnly. Marie was having a bath. I dialled the police from a street booth. I listened to the distant ringing. My short period in amateur drama came in handy here. I had only one line. The cue came.

'The stolen mind you are looking for has just been seen by my son parked in front of the Forster Hamburger Joint.'

I replaced the black phallus onto its technological balls and thought of the lethal package Susan had left in the boot. When I returned Susan was cracking eggs into the pan. I watched her making them. The whole house felt strange as though it wanted to be blown up like all houses seem to do. To need. No, it was not the need but the silence. Susan had not talked for some seconds. Frowning at the sputtering eggs. Wanting to make them exactly as she always wanted them. Hard, slightly blackening at the edges.

'Come on, come on,' she muttered.

There was only three minutes before the Cathedrals came down. And the mini exploded.

For the first time I noticed the tiny beads of sweat on her forehead. I eased my dog collar a little. It was hot. I stood behind her and kissed the top of her head. Three minutes. My jeans and sweater. Hurriedly I took off my priest's garb. Dressed. Grabbed the cameras and raced for my car. I drove with ease. Parked. And waited. This tyranny of WAITING. It should be blown right out of peoples' lives. The fucking stinking waiting. At bus stops, railway stations, subways, traffic lights, shop counters, toilets, at the undertakers. At. At. At.

The huge shattering sound exploded simultaneously from the three deafening blasts. Catapulting dangerous debris in all directions. The instant the camera began to roll. The instant the stricken human panic stampeded centrifugally from the explosions. . . . This was finally IT.

'MOTHERFUCKING CHRIST!'

I was not thinking of this orgasm when, against the background of the weird stringy, but slow, panic from Stravinsky, Patricia had accepted the joint I passed on to her and she said:

'Do you hang around for the easy fuck?'

I contemplated her bare toes. I contemplated the whole party: Joe, Kathy, Nick, Susan, Stephen, etc.

From the corner of my eye I could see Stephen and Marie - on opposite sides of the room - and wondered when Stephen would decide to have another attack. Patricia saw me sizing up Stephen. She licked her lower lip with a small wet red tongue, laughed.

'He won't mind,' she said.

And squirmed up against me.

Marie was staring straight at us. I eerily felt that she could see everything including the locked drawers in my brains. Patricia's thigh against my thighs. Her full firm breasts demanding asylum on my chest. That mouth poised and wet. Poised to kiss my lips and suck my cock. Suck my balls. The nose firm like a likeable, but timid, erection. And the eyes already liquid, burning for the fusion. No. One did not fuck her for her face. There were many faces like hers. It was the body. That all-woman's body, pressing enticingly, teasingly, but earnestly against me. With Marie's eyes radiating a lethal black sunlight upon Patricia and I. Marie's eyes blazing fully upon IT. Patricia had taken my now fuelled erection into her mouth, had swivelled so my tongue leaped into her cunt, my one hand found a breast, and the other one still clamped her delicious throat to my swollen and only idea.

Before I temporarily blacked out to everything to do with the whole party, I had one sudden vision of Stephen, with Marie constricted underneath him, a revelation of flesh in the wildly pumping distortions of her silk dress.

When Patricia and I came to and peered cautiously round, it was

to discover all the other heads - arranged in pairs - also coming to and peering cautiously round. The record had long since struck and its repeated fragment - strident, squeaky, yet as ironical as a fart - gradually, relentlessly pulled at the mouth of the house until lips, at first stretched into a sheepish smile, burst into laughter.

REAL HEALTHY WHOLEFOOD FUCKIN' LAUGHTER.
Christ.

Ten

The ugly fact. Erect. Oozing a black light. Plunged. Heaved. Up down. Up down. Smiling an unsmiling authority. Fucking the ugly fact of the street. Controlled jets of moonwhite water spurted from the desolation's wrenched-open mouth. Thoughts that crack like nuts in the explosion of a raindrop. The rough shimmer of tension speeds from the past towards my vantage point. Assaulting me with the dust and grit of ancestors, dinosaurs, pterodactyls. Showers of premonition. The utmost and edge. Struck the ear. With bestial fact. Seeing a sneer where human lips shape themselves into a purposeful smile. Way down there on the looming platform. Fucking and sucking the air with speech. Wordchisels which chip the marble listener. Carving him into the new image of Austerity is Wealth. Spreading the thighs across my groin. Heaving. Up down. Squelching spilted words into the many eared cunt. Austerity. Austerity. These drab rimless streets, the tainted asphalt of means that have no end. But austerity. Screwing the shit out of the cowering air. Here and there, eyes glaze over in wideawake stupor. Up down. Crunch the feet of soldiers. Austerely. Striding. The microphone deeper and deeper pushes into the dark lips. Speechifying. The ugly fact. Suddenly oozes. Flanked by Ministers. Licking. The blunt and abrupt cheer. Fucked into astonished silence. Down there in the towering sky, a bright disc blazes. Nerves. Moods. A palpable gloom. Blacker polished night. Revealing dentures. The dazzling sharkgrin words. Sounds that are all surface and have no inner meaningful core. Their ugly fact, bludgeoning ears. The space

above our heads was a huge magnifying glass. Held the lens magnified by the mesmerizing menace of the Leader's Address. The toilet rolls struck the platform the instant the first shots rang out. Eggs, tomatoes, bags of flour, dentures, effigies, struck the microphones. Struck the Leader's hastily disappearing back. The camera whirred. The blood and bother of bodies and bullets writhed. Erupted upward with one lethal sheer sound. Broke windows. Smashed telephone booths. Set on fire any flammable thing. Sneering the shit into Austerity. Smearing the sordid sunlight across the sky. Truncheons, rifles, sticks, stones, bottles fucked beaded scrunched exploded. Drew in their breath to expel the frightful impact. The yell, a big fist, unclenches. Breaking in reason's doors. Opportunity's window. Pounding away with feet of fright. Hurlled. Shoved. Spit. Shat. Austerity. Shook history's shirtfront. The knuckles bayonet-ripped, oozing vision.

Tearing the arthritis out of the street's fingers.

The heart's placard a void displays.

That primed vacuum of "Why not?"

I drive it home through streets ravaged by the howling stampede. Dump the cameras. Drive it home until, like sweat, it begins to ooze out through my pores. Marie drags out of the box the ugly remnant of our childhood. Seriously. I procrastinate. Wearily. And in the bath wash the dirt from each other. Talking. Because of the urgent need not to talk. That fucking conscience. Why not. Her nipples. Those ideas of charity so pale the eyes dissolve in it. Invisible. Tensed. Charged with insight. Radiating a total and unflinching clarity. The mouth, Marie. The mouth. With asps underneath. Moving. Not listening to the squeaked disgust of the water. Knowing that a distant sentimentality had not been fully erased. In spite of the demons. The mental surrender to a lethal penetration. Ouch. Awkward, fucking in the bath. Infecting her. Lovingly. Staring at her unstarling face thinking of the fearful scum out there. Banging impotently at the stout memory. About to unleash the raging sneer into her. The endless sickening sweetness. The stout, dismal swiftly clenched spasm. Nowhere to look but the toothbrushes and plates and the mirror with its wrinkled versions of our faces. Ah. Circe. The pigs that once were my hopes. The refusal itself a conscious death. Bashing heads in. Firing watercannon. Booting in the

sky to wreck all illusion. Moving. The mind from miles ahead watches the interlocked bodies writhe. Moving. The judges and the magistrates. Their mounds of legal shit. The bollocks of their wisecracks. About to unleash into Marie. The canker. The insult that creates existence. Moves. Grasps firmly to its erection malnutrition's painted mouth. Pumping the shit. Scrunching it. BLANCHE-BLANCHE. And will come out dead screaming her. The clock already measuring the cold hours to come. That pelfaced terror in which all life swims. Underneath the microscope. Organizing towns, cities, nations, united nations. Unfolding towels. Taste the bitter emptiness that underlines the ruthless scenario. Controlling the urge to smash the glass and scatter the human goods. Brush the unwinking twilight from her brain. The baggage that stretched her arms. And I dismantle myself into an overnight suitcase where I last all winter like a premonition. This image the advertisers grasp . . . their mouths a 999 call. The bell rings. Summoning Macbeth.

It's Sordid Joe, blind drunk, sweating disgust with the ease of gutter memories. Soiled to the soul. Clinging fast to a precarious notoriety. He bumps through the room, staggers finally to the concoction I prepare for him. Wipes the dizzying vision from his eyes. Drinks. Stringy Adam's apple heaves up and down until it settles. Out of sight underneath the morose chin. Hawks, rakes phlegm. Swallows. From the secrets deep in his hoary overcoat, he draws out a large scrap of newspaper. I read. Nod. The execution of the armed robbers was there in huge nauseatingly detailed photographs. Sordid Joe smiles wincingly. I refill our glasses. May as well get drunk. The way reality was drunk, sordidly drunk on the fearful concoctions from teachers, priests, financiers, soldiers, pigs, leaders. Joe held forth. Talk, talk. Talk was the virus, the drink daily drunk. It was sitting there within Sordid Joe. Leading to the final request. Money. With a mild rebuke about taking pictures of the executions. I hand it over. Closing the door softly behind the remarkable fact of Sordid Joe's bounded experiment. The miles of desolation out there. Their disgusting secretions staining everything. . . .

The shit streaming through the firmament. Drenching the spark that would set it on fire.

Raving of a marriage between heaven and hell.

And Nicola slinks in through the back door, saying nothing but shimmering blindingly against the intellect. Marie creeps out of her stupor. I retreat into my shell. Looking questioningly at the plastic bag in Nicola's hands.

'Gellignite,' she says.

Pouring a drink.

She exudes a permanently stoned light. Its wideopen eyes unshrinking. Her plaited hair and gleaming buckteeth. The lips always on the verge of tracing out the exact shape of an unflinching smile. Eighteen, and already wedged underneath the door. The only sounds of pain coming out of her were those irritated flat statements denouncing all rationality. That brutal unrecognizable intellect that was the machine running all destiny. Its sharp scalpels protruding out of people's heads to analyse the sun. Underneath the long drab skirts, the tightly locked legs that would suddenly spread out wide open to receive another kind of song. Shining down from the flash-ing sky. Aeroplanes. Their sharp orgasmic cries like birds in abrupt and daring flight. Their tiny silhouettes black dots against the bright blue void. This solid emptiness that filled her, making her feel pregnant. My guts churn over, thinking suddenly how unreal, un-focused, unrepentant my premises were. Their shocking fact still tainted what insides peered out through all my senses. Chronicling shit. And now, warped and twisted into some stringent desire that carried cameras, fucked Marie, wrote, watched Susan blow up things, et al. A series of indefinable electric shocks smacking my brain with a less and less insistent impact. Life, that Immanent Mind, watched the living on its own television screen. Masturbat-ing. Again and again. Eating excreting breathing reading cutting its nails. Developing theories of exactly what Life meant. That incred-ible insect. The only prompter of all our actions. Making Nicola reel from nightmare to nightmare, in which a Brain Fiend controlled the panel of buttons that controlled her every thought, word, deed, impulse. She was now convinced that something or someone posses-sed her body. Some devil who had walked in. Some telepathic weirdo against whom she had committed some secret unknowable sin. Invariably, this fiend took the shape of her father. . . . And she would crack, blasphemous, hurl obscene insults at the long since dead

memory. The fucking father reaching out, even from the grave, to screw her mind until she went insane. The arte-fucking teachers bhudgeoning, raping her mind with facts. Ugly facts. Horsehair matrons who elaborated at length on how they thought she would come to a sticky end. The frightful boyfriends - boyfriends were always frightful - who actually thought they owned you. What the fuck. That was only the beginning. There was this whole stinking world and it was inside one, too. Before plunging one's head into the oven one could at least blast some of the shit reality out of existence. Not as an answer. There were no answers. But only as a happening. Christ. That stinking intellect. And she took out her purse. Rolled a joint. Passed it around. Abstractedly. As though she was not right there before me but was the faint contracted thing coiled tightly deep inside me. Coming out already blackened at the edges. Offering the mindblowing cigarette. Behind which glowing point my mind thought; refusing to focus on anything but the concussing effects of space and time. The thousand separate perspectives from which to view the point of a needle. The making of a story. That limit-less impossible photographic essay. Tired. Tied down. The whole systematically corroding the metal of my existence. By matchlight.

I went out.

Walking.

BLANCHEBLANCHE.

The moon, unsheathed, glinted. As cold as a silver coin in a fridge. This gigantic incredible thought. Emanating from the buildings, from the blazing streetlights, from the shadowed figures hurrying to and fro. Like a hunk of rock within my brains. Its edges cutting. Gritting. The taut skull about to shatter. A hand reached out:

'Hey!'

And slid round my waist. Susan. All lit up like magnesium burn-ing. She led me to her borrowed motorbike. Enthused. But as she is about to ride it, this voice yanks her off with a curse. Black leather jacket. Metal studded. Grizzled head with squinting eyes, abrupt nose, mouth an outraged straightline. Caricature, my mind said. But Susan had wrenched herself from his grip and now confronted him. Shocked. Burning with anger.

'That's my bike, lady.'

The Man's voice high pitched. With electric wires peeled naked. Obviously a pose. Dangerous but so what.

Susan had said nothing. Frozen with contempt. Staring at this specimen, who owned things and too alarmingly, said, 'That's my bike, lady.' Male. Christ.

Before I had registered his first reeling grunt of pain, she had struck him again and again and there he was at her feet, bleeding. Stunned. The shock staring up into her deep black anger. Cracked by her heel backwards, the neck snapping back. The swift maniacal intelligence of her fury engulfed him as though in a sudden blistering typhoon. When later I dragged her off, he was unrecognizable. Still conscious. Spitting teeth onto the ground. We did not look back.

Nicola sat in front of the fire peering unflinchingly into its hottest core. Tears streaked down her cheeks. Marie had taken down the old ukelele. She was singing. Susan took one look at Nicola and shouted at Marie to 'STOP. STOP IT.' And kissed hugged caressed Nicola who throughout sat there confronting the redhot embers for a flame of reality. Eyes stinging, Susan slapped Nicola hard. Once. Twice. Three times. But still the girl sat there, crying silently into the fire. The wideopen eyes had a lurid brilliance. Cold and unwinking.

Wringing out dry, those tears and fears. This grown-up silence that savaged the house with its experiments. This forever tension out there with its jackboots, gas, bullets, phlegmatic pogroms. Screwing the brains tightly into Nicola. Claiming the shit from Susan. That endless winding sheet. That shroud. I tried to see it. That penniless barefoot distance, without shelter, glittering with well-laid-out thorns. Lives spluttered, backfired. Broke down. In that cold unwinking hour. And raged with a bitter point through Nicola's nerves, through Susan's maniacal intelligence, through Chris's spat-out shit. I had seen him, Chris, simultaneously detonating venom and leaping astride a gas canister in the Square. Chronided it down on cold unwinking film. Nauseated. Fucked. Distilled into the last ugly droplet of reality. Leaping astride exploding gas canisters. Raging. Smashed aside by vigilant truncheon. Reeling. All the sky askew. Letting loose a punch that smacked the pig's face into the back of the skull. Staggering. Dizzily wrenching a perspective from-

the teeming turmoil. Roaring. Screeching farts. And with stout stick crunching out of the mêlée. Bashing skulls left and right. A bullet nicking the button from his shirt. Run. Running. Side streets run. An optical trick of flying elbows and knees. Leaving no more than bloodstains and a red pillar of cloud. Made Susan mad. Such useless demonstration. Sitting there, eyes glued on the TV screen where the scrimonious face of law and order was hissing mindless threats against Communists and their mindless sympathizers.

'That's us,' Nicola said, suddenly.

Startling Susan and I.

She had smashed her way out of the glittering glass shell. Her lips curled uncertainly. Her long drab skirts now shifting as she stretched out her legs. Dabbed at her wet cheeks with rims of Kleenex. Smiling faintly. Uneasily. After her attack. So unlike one of Stephen's 'attackers'. I looked quickly at Marie. But she sat impassively. Her whole demeanour eloquently demure. Making me suddenly aware that she had always known all about it. Those brute and subversive noises. The whole thin stick on which the Black Sunlight Organization precariously sat. A thin and dry branch of a thick and tall tree that had been dead for ninety years. And as we sat in my house watching the news and thinking thoughts and campaigning against the intellect, I knew she knew one day that thin dry branch would crack and send us flying down onto the hard bloodstained ground. Fucked. Boiling with a seething martyrdom. Having smashed the boot through the glass veneer of the state. Of our nerves. And minds. That sheer blatant amterity. Is wealth. In our wake, smashed institutions. Smashed minds. Smashed traffic signs. Smashed courtrooms. Smashed armories. Eyeballs whirring. Their red veins sticking out to encapsulate the black sunlight up there deep down here. Right here in our heritage. Fucked. Leaving nothing but Bull Shit Organs. Screwed. The assholes. Those ugly facts. My trial.

Precariously doomed. Perpetually primed. And, in that, somewhat erased, leaving only the faint outlines of caricatures. Strange and cutting. Yielding only to the preposterous inevitable end. Which would not end all. The bestial fact would always be there. To appall. To astound. To ignite into action such estranged hearts as these. For whom there could be no ending. No cutting coronary of fear to shriek one into the blind end of settling down to work and

spawn. Against that cul-de-sac one cultivated something more than a mere and total impassivity. A fearful rage, blinding. An extreme rebellion, convulsing. But under a firm control. Disciplined and maniacal control of nerves. And action.

'No, Nicola, that's not us,' Susan said impatiently.

And she was right. For we did not and had never claimed responsibility for the bombings and the 'happenings'. No Black Sunlight Organization existed - publicly and even privately to the Special Branch and the security forces. There were only the endless fragmented left-wing parties from which now and then we had won members. Nick. Nicola. Susan. And to stretch a point, myself. Even the very name, BSO was a joke. Bakunin Shits Okay. Bleeding Soda (cf. Orifices). Black Souls Organize. To atrophy ourselves with a BSO label was shit. I had in a moment of drunken empathy with Chris coined the thing about black sunlight and of course he had seen the other side of that blinding light. Not that he did not know whatever other side there was, he said. Hiccopped. I was trying to get him to explain how he had spiked me out of my head and with what kind of dope on my first three days at Devil's End. Fingering his necklace of bones and scratching underneath his denim shirt he had said:

'Just something I picked up from a psychiatrist.'

I had demanded that he elaborate.

'Well, it wasn't hypnosis, though of course there is a blind side to that,' he had replied.

And passed the wineakin.

I drank, watching him. He had come through a long way. Even now - watching Susan and Nicola watching the TV news - I wondered: Had he really truly come through? It was a difficult run, spiked with rapids and cataracts. There were so many false stopping and watering places. Had we all come through? I was sure of Katherine. I was sure of Susan. But that was all. I was not sure of myself. The brute and unflinching hatred was not there. But did I really register in my innermost being nothing of all this that was happening? It was impossible. I could feel the inexorable rot gradually settling in the marrow of my bones. A dark pencil-thin rim around the abyss was the dream's edge. It reached out memory's swift current, pulsing with a cutting perception. Nick had once

written: 'The goldspeaking river/Toward the wet dark/Floods the century/And my heart into the void/The lingering optimism pours.' Was it like that? Seeing through brainblood this journey's trajectory. Dreams bayonet-ripped. And every sudden glance meets in mid-flight the Worm's sneer. It was not like that. Even for Nick when we talked endlessly into the night. Talked of what marrowed him with mortality. The pitiful roads that endlessly track a man's unseen destinations. (That Time spent in the playground before the fatal knell.) That probability which curtains the Future's glass. How what I am, and will be, death created long ago. The knuckles of those conversations bruised my vision. Burst out of me, fighting, streets fallen. He did not know the fire and the hurt. He could not go with the lyre and the net. He could not touch the lips and mirth. But saw everywhere evidence of mastodons. Mastodons. Fresh from the original mud. He would suddenly exclaim:

*At what coronach
Erased from the air
Bright boys!*

And dwell on 'This revelation/Of absent things/Suddenly present/In a breast long since broken'. And suddenly unscrew the lot and with a bitter gaiety exhort me to:

*Come and with rockets
Fuck existence out of socket
This stale sky that wrenches out whisky
That pale destiny our last significant mirage.*

But he was, within the burning bush, cold; within the fiery creation, meaningless. All the roaring significance he heard was a throat sore, a belly empty, a brain thinking it was a brain. Uneasily he would transfix me with a wet but diamond eye:

*Can wisdom scratch out my itch
This blatant existence that reeks of sorrow*

*In the mind's pool
Are moon and stars
Good as Eden shed
'Gainst moral mud.*

But even as he listened to that 'Sound once dropt/In thoughts abrupt as lead' - whose lips brand a bloodred kiss - he felt in himself that 'To believe nothing/Is what the water ripples'. And I would refill our glasses and read my own things to him. The discussions would blaze with all the agony of brainblood. All night through. With all the sincerity of a coat on fire. Into the small hours. And Marie who liked to listen in and join us would from time to time passionately burst out with gemlike insights which Nick would, in a rush, furiously note down and look at her as though at the igneous heart of genius. I liked him. He was so much, then, what I had been when I was his age. And I could understand too well why Patricia kept him at a hideous distance and tortured him in the only sickening way she knew. But Stephen could not stand Nick. 'He's wet,' Stephen would say. 'Highfalutin' wet.' In a way I agreed with that verdict. But with a feeling of being unjust. That was it: Nick always embarrassed me. He was too transparently innocent. As I had never really been.

Even Chris, in his own soiled way, was pellucidly innocent. But his was the kind that in the twinkling of an eye spits out a glitter. One of those deadly Italian flick-knives. Slashing a throat. His moods and words - however sullied - were also like that. That deep, outraged, upside-down innocence. Which was its own right and wrong without caring the slightest shit what wrong and right are.

'Have a mint,' Susan broke in.

The TV news had ended.

Some bloke was making predictions about the weather.

Idea of March.

Nicola had taken out a book with the title *Unhinging the Mind*.

The room was comfortably warm. The fire low. The only sounds were Susan opening the packet of mints and the weird static from the weather-predicting television. All the other rooms of the house may as well not have existed. So creeping silent were they. Marie had taken up the ukelele. She was fingering it without playing. Nicola looked at Susan who smiled and nodded.

'Play something, Marie,' Nicola said.

And as the soft tinny sounds began to blend into one enigmatic melody, I turned down the volume of the TV and sprawled on the rug with my head in Susan's lap. How changed she was, this Susan. It was not an outward visible transformation. But something remoter, unplayable, a stringent finely edged glittering. Perhaps it was the room. Containing as it did the calm spectacle - almost domestic - of these the realists walking wounded whose resilience and effort were inextricably bound up with the shattered flesh and minds that were our separate characters. Timidly. Blending with Marie's quick-plucked, heart-wrenching song. But she was not really singing. She was speaking to herself, speaking in accompaniment of the ukelele. Saying:

'You know about changelings? I feel them all the time. As though we were all changelings and not exactly what we appear to be. That's what I was trying to sing to Nicola. There's so much missing inside where things ought not to be missing. As if something indefinable was taken out of us long long ago. Don't you feel that sometimes?'

I could have said I felt like that all the time. I could have said that's how everything seems to be. Most of the time. The ghastly emptiness that was always there. The feeling of having died and yet not really died, of how one had been subtracted from all that makes life a living experience. I could have said it was the fear inside me of a world whose changes would never include a change for the better. Like hearing in the middle of the night some phantom figure moving about hammering nails into all the things one had learnt to take for granted. Discovering how infinitely a human condition despair was. Hammering nails into a coffin in which the image of a whole historical notion lay with its arms crossed over its breast. Hammering nails into the dog-gnawed palm of Jezebel's hand. And the blood streaming eternally in the firmament, with not a single drop to save Faustus from the hour at hand. All this which was happening out there in the grim outside of our thoughts and emotions was finally approaching nearer and nearer to the unrefusing mortality of our blood. I could no more have convinced myself that it was nothing to do with us than have hypnotized myself into believing that every ache out there was my ache and every bayonet flashing in the sun my bayonet. I could

have thrown up my hands in disbelief, parried all questions and happenings with Pilate's question: What is truth? These incredible situations which this impossible creation makes possible. But all this had nothing to do with the small lightning that flashed suddenly from the touch of Susan's hand on my index finger. And there was the thunder incredibly uncoiling and uncoiling down to the last tendril in the innermost cellular world. Matthew Arnold's still sad music seemed to have ceased utterly, leaving us the sole inheritors of a silence-divining wasteland. Here was no pilgrim's progress, no mythical Sisyphus bound forever to push his rock, no Prometheus hurling defiance at Zeus even as he watches the vultures engorge themselves on his chained body. Ah Chris. And there we were, Susan, Nicola, Marie and I. I had never killed before. But killing suddenly seemed only a small irrelevancy to the interior happenings of the house. But they were indissolubly connected to what was happening out there. However ephemerally. We had I suppose talked and behaved ourselves into a mood whose shadow would always outgrow us. No longer could we register the temperature of the blood in ourselves. The reading of the instincts and archetypal triggers. We had so given ourselves up for lost that there was only a meaninglessness which perhaps cybernetics could trace on a graph. At the same time the thoughts that controlled our feelings were not those of where straightlines come from nor where they go. There was no centre either, no circumference, but as it were spiralling nebulae, galaxies beyond galaxies, exploding wildly outward, hurtling away towards the incredible infinite that lay beyond the boundaries in which we had lingered.

And I remembered. It was raining that day. The coup d'état had failed. The Air Force had largely been loyal and had brought down, or driven off, what few bombers had actually turned out against the city. I crawled out from underneath a mass of concrete and girders which had miraculously stopped short of killing me. I could see no one else in the whole length of that gapped street. Dust and blood and sweat - fear-sweat - had caked my body and it was uncomfortable in my dirty jeans. I got my bearings again and found the place where I had hidden my rucksack. As I hitched the wretchedly heavy thing onto my back, the smoke and flames crackling and gutting the gaping windows and doors on either side of the street

showered the air with an indescribable horror. There was something uncommonly surreal about it. With the camera I had shot as much as I dared; my first serious assignment for *Precision*. At the back of my mind were thoughts about my recent severance from Blanche and now Marie whom I had driven out of the city. Inside me was a stone that had learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. A light drizzly rain. Rain that looked and felt like an attitude rather than an actual occurrence called weather. I uncorked the flask of whisky I had brought and wandered up the street towards the building which Nick had indicated. The whisky was burning my throat when I crossed a derelict playground and went round to the front of the building. I walked up to the top floor and listened to Nick releasing the three locks and unbolting the seven chains. As I stepped into the room I shook his hand warmly. I did not then know that soon he would go out there in a hysterical rage against 'everything' and be shot down. He had painted a mural on one of the walls. As I looked at it he had said:

'I've decided to call it *War*.'

But all there was on the wall was the nude, the bloodred leopard, the archer, the falcon, the zebra, and the thick growth of savage jungle. It reminded me of Rousseau's naked man vainly fleeing - in the thick heart of darkness - from a pouncing leopard. But the stylized nature of the mural made it a kind of - for our times - emblematic necessity.

'Your hands are cold,' he had said.

My hands and feet had always been cold. Blanche had ominously said it was because of bad circulation. I passed the bottle of whisky to him. While he drank I unstrapped the rucksack from my back and took out my camera and typewriter to check for damage. It was not much. I took off my wet things and changed my clothes. I was thinking of how mice, rats, and rabbits reabsorb young embryos into the uterus, and how crowded fish prevent their population increasing by eating all the fry and also reducing their own numbers by cannibalism. Cats eat their kittens when disturbed. Birds sometimes break their eggs, kill fledglings, or desert their nests. Other animals eat their young too. Blanche had also talked of how spontaneous abortion and cultural checks control, in the same way, human populations so that starvation cannot occur. How she had talked.

Intelligence is not an end but developed because of its adaptive advantages. Behaviour, she said, is an intermediary between internal feelings and external objects. Culture provides ways of using the external environment to satisfy physical and mental needs, be they pleasure and pain, appetites and aversions, living and reproducing. She had begun to talk like that as soon as it became clear we were not going to 'hit it off, old fruit'. She had begun to talk as though she needed to observe herself clinically from afar whenever I was in her vicinity. A cultural system, she said, must shape the behaviour of a multiplicity of individuals so that it forms a consistent whole, favourable to the survival of the society. And I returned from Oxford to find the culture and the society of my country broken down, replaced by manufactured images, fiction and fantasy. I could hear Blanche saying: 'The breakdown of cultures makes the provision of entertainment (even war) a necessity. Yes, bad circulation.'

In many ways Nick was very like Blanche. Both had the same tortured irrepressible intelligence, the same, as it were, unrepentant attitude towards 'reality'. But I was too aware of how painful and sordid the struggle was for him. His first public poetry reading was his last. It was at the Institute of Technology. His last - for all at once it became clear the students were out for his blood. They objected to the 'vulgar words', the unintelligibility, and they asserted that 'workers did not understand him and his modernistic European manner'. The venomous electricity in the hall finally - I had never seen him lose his temper - made Nick retort: 'I am astonished at the audience's ignorance. I did not expect such a low cultural level among you. Those who do not understand my work are simply illiterate. One must learn.' A brick was thrown. Soon all was pandemonium. Nick, visibly concussed by the experience retreated into himself, tried suicide, failed, and hurled himself more into the writing and the political work. I encouraged him to give private readings at my house. There I would gather his friends and my friends, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes, the room thick with talk and resounding with informed argument. At first there was an element of play in it all; but this was soon supplanted by firmer enmities, stronger ties, more agonized and anguished self-questionings. Because his poems were in English and not in our own

language his detractors - and there were many - associated him with an intellectual conservatism in spite of his revolutionary (his own meaning) subjects. It was all a far cry from his young days when such movements as cubism and futurism were leaping like fire from tongue to tongue. We then were tired of churning out bits and pieces for the tourist and anthropology market - Blanche's racket - but there were no guidelines, only this vast room and need for experiment. And experiment, of course, had the face of negritude to those on the left and the brutishness of a passing fashion to those on the right. But he was happy, extolling the love of danger, the habit of energy and valour. The catchwords were: courage, audacity, and rebellion. The subjects were forward motion, feverish sleeplessness, the sporting step, the somersault, the slap and the blow of a fist. As the Italian Marinetti had proclaimed: 'Poetry is a cruel attack against unknown forces in order to compel them to humble themselves before man.' There was no beauty apart from conflict. There were no masterpieces without aggression. Syntax, the adverb, and punctuation marks were to be abolished. Poetry had to be a continuous succession of images. New images. There were no such things as elegant and vulgar images. Intuition, which assimilates images, knew no privilege, or distinction. The principle of maximum disorder was the sole function of order in a poem. And Nicola, in triumph, added that in order to arrive one must give up intelligibility for it is not necessary to be understood. Words liberated from punctuation radiate one upon another and cross their various magnetisms, following their own continuous dynamism. He was off like a shot. His detractors bellowed out that he was merely mirroring the fashionable or eccentric movements in Europe and Russia.

'Changelings,' Marie was saying on her ukelele.

Of one of his harshest detractors, Nick said: 'I do not know how to excuse him for having considered his poetry worth publishing. It is not a great imperfection to write verses badly but it is a lack of judgement in him not to have felt how unworthy they were of the glory of his name.'

Nick was here quoting Montaigne's statement about Cicero.

It is not enough to be sick in halves; a man's gotta go the whole hog.

That plangent feeling of self-disgust.

Rising from beyond the rim of the unknown.

With death only a drop of blood away. Giving, giving unreservedly. Sucked the grey matter of our brains into a meatgrinder which ground our shadows to the sound of Stravinsky. That dead march. Those saints singing. This living jazz whose elbow is the horn. What nights, insider, what nights! Deep down in the sky, peering at the outside of a star. Cool spiders in grimy corners sipping absinthe. Spinning gigantic webs of small is beautiful. At our feet, the city burns with fireflies. Paranoia. Its own womb. These waiting rooms, detention centres, police stations. The knives and dagger-thrusts of that long, long wait. The guttural sounds become poetry. That short walk to the grave, only a rational thought away. Only a strong feeling away. Meeting all the versions of yourself which did not come out of the womb with you. These who wear their skeletons on the outside. Exposed all their waking life to the ordinance map of their own madness. Teaching me to unwrap the bandage of cynicism and reveal eyes so long bound by it. But there is nothing to be seen except ruined cities, minds diseased, paratroopers dropping in thousands out of the unmoving magnifying glass of the sky. These changelings that in Marie's song occupy the time of our imagination. Their sharp red eyes glint with a poison redder than nerves. Are they that long lost part of us that always turns up like a bad penny? Their stunted and twisted physiology as indescribable as liverish roots. Reminds me of Blanche. Her eyes and lips and body and every whim of the winds blowing into my face was a sensuous experience. A rainy sheen spinning around the sun. With no money worth sneezing about. Intense poetic manias, concussion into existence by the collision of illusion and reality. As if one's own brain and feelings were beating within another person. Every single nerve and muscle weaving quixotic meanings, poignances. Reaching out to that phantasm and creation of my own imagination. The insider, silhouetted against the black blinding sunlight. The vast inner emptiness seeking to leech upon the obscure vitals that exist out there. A ravenous state of feeling, the world outlook. And I see myself for the kraken I was. Still dripping with the contagion of the deepest seabed. The hue and essence of sanity. Incestuous. Mountains and hills of her ranged across my vision. The same ancient and sedimentary era as my own

feeling and thoughts. History's idiosyncrasy. This desire to expose the wounds of an undecided innocence. No more were nocturnal insights reclusive treasures to be savoured in the secrecy of poems and stories; they were to be the inspiring spark to set reality's façade on fire.

The catalyst and progenitor, a siren imprisoned in a vast aquarium, howls a thin and honey melody which the faces ranged round it cannot hear though they see the tiny bubbles of its anguish streaming to the surface. Admitting neither her youth nor her blindness. But only the enticing myth of the African Dream. My nightmare of neuroses which Blanche could do without. That old fashioned 'importance of being oneself'. What did it mean when the Cretan said all Cretans are liars. We are like matches being systematically scratched alight and put out in a dark and confined room. Terrorizing the neighbourhood with quotes from Fanon's psychiatric notebooks. That set of multiple parallel foci. And I could not live on dreams but scholarships in my waking state. Money could not be comfortably scorned. I was haunted by a thousand things but the fiercest of them was about making money. Starving when Blanche left me to stew in my own juice. It seems to be a perpetual condition of my state that I should periodically wratch and detach myself to the wandering humanity out there and call each attachment a profound and living thing. It does not even have to happen by design. No single heart is safe from the passions of an accidental glance. This perpetual naming of parts. Wrenching my mind out of joint. Tearing the skin off my knees. All night through, that black angel, butting me with the steel of a divine brow, kneeling me between the legs with the nightmare impact of past and future clashing at once like lightning bolts erupting suddenly, she has, that black dream, arched her body taut like a full-drawn bow and with clenched lip and tense-wrought shoulder loosed the force that attracts the earth around the sun catapulting me like Prometheus into the eerie depths. Way up there, deep in the abyss. The way of the insider. Where the moon and the sixpence still twinkle over the violet Pacific nights. Where the sound and the fury still blows over the deep south. And golden notebooks tell of the tensions that travel through white-hot wires from Cape Town to Dumfriesshire. But the Nazi ironclad churns closer. Its gun lashes out anew. Marriages

based on beauty and amorous desires are soon blitzed out of existence; and, as Juvenal says, 'verae have their own fingers to excite' producing a mood more amorous than love itself, so much that whenever I saw Blanche I was, with Virgil, 'athirst to take the member in and hide it deep'. Friendship and constancy eluded me and I was in no mood to disagree with Socrates when he said that whichever a man does he will repent it. And time and place do not root our dreams in certainty. This noise and turmoil of a mind thinking out its thoughts. Akin to a marriage between fear and freedom. Each hewn down to the level of the other. The vast longitudes of history are pressed and tightly hammered together till the lives in between cannot utter a shriek. Thomas Paine and Locke, Fontaine and Aesop, are the minutes that make up the hour in a draughty seminar room. Ants, tulips, and anacondas, are the voices in the gritty trumpet. Cigarettes and whisky, artichokes and popovers, are the beads strung round Nick and Nicola's frail shoulders. There are pink crabs at the shallow end of the pool to light the candles out of the moon. At the rainbow end of the beerhall black strippers dance a whole tradition out of existence. The inside of my old man's testicles banished the children to a region Milton never dreamed of. The Eumenides are not behind the curtains but are the grains of dirt on my spectacle lenses. And that makes it worse; enlightens the syntax of cerebral longitudes. Copied down neat from the septic wounds and void. Krakens dribbling obscene tentacles underneath the tightly wedged doors I have used to barricade myself from my shadow. (Steve Biko died while I was blind drunk in London. Soweto burned while I was sunk in deep thought about an editor's rejection slip.) Goes on detonating dynamite sticks in my mind till I reel with the blinding exterminating force of a crazed ejaculation. Diminishing the gravel mound of pity until the worm-eaten corpse is exposed to what winds and sun care to blow and shine. Goes on piling perplexity upon complexity, fact on fact, disaster on calamity, until the mind hollers ENOUGH. But there is not enough in death's design. Shouts for the bloodbrains of insiders. The prisons full of meat chained to the walls. The mortuaries stuffed full of the multitude's hope. The seminar rooms reek of the cannibalized perfume of a new generation bent on the same path. Even this house with its plague of intellect and protest. Insiders! They are out

there, an eternal skyblackening swarm of locusts parachuting out of the sky in unmarked planes. In here - within these walls - they articulate the necessity and the pity.

'Can you prove that I exist?'

'Yes, if you tell me who is speaking.'

That is the whole point of these many words. I am as fit to be laughed at as able to laugh. A man may be humble through vainglory. Fingernails engrained with the dirt of self-abasement. Cut the milk teeth on humiliation. There is nothing but a hideous dark ahead, a moonless sunless starless world. With its Armoured Insect whose power it is to cast the shadows that dog our steps from the delirium of the womb to the shattered mask of the tomb. The eyes of that holy cockroach in bright black sunlight have mosaic vision, each chink receiving an image which is a fraction of the whole object - man - in view. The sum of these fractions gives a whole image of our thinking and horror. And when this God Insect has had its fill, Malpighian tubules attached to the beginning of the hindgut extract us from the blood and pour us into the gut where the water is reabsorbed through the walls to excrete us solid and whole but in spirit broken utterly. As I stood at the dream's window watching the skies packed solid with more and more of these God Insects parachuting down upon us in endless wave after endless wave, it seemed I could hear Claudian saying, 'It is not victory unless the vanquished admits your mastery'. Reason and good sense have not rid me of anxiety. The best is beyond in all cases; giving to each enough rope to knot the noose of life. Is it enough to say, 'What a waste all effort chase'? A root that always grows in the direction of the available water. Darwin noted that elongation of the growing apex of either a shoot, or a root, did not take place in a straightline but pursued a spiral course. Thoughts perhaps do not think in straightlines. The response of a plant to wounding causes enough speculation and wonder to form a basis for the kind of fiction that ranges from Wyndham's novels to the more scary types of Ashton Smith. The leaves of the *Oxalis* fold down at night and open again in the morning whereas the *Night-Scented Stock* close their petals during the day but open up at dusk. *Mimosa pudica*, when touched, or subjected to shock, closes up its leaflets and leaves, making even the petioles droop. This is like the (Hebraic) Just Man's extreme sensitiveness to

suffering, as depicted in Chaim Potok's book, the experience of suffering petrifies the soul in one so finely tuned. But there are the horror movements of the Venus Fly Trap which exhibits the fiendish side of nature's grand design. The Geatpo could never have invented such an intricate thing but their cumbersome gas ovens performed their tasks unobtrusively well. Ah, as Nick would say, the infinite solitude of plants wherein they seem to prize nothing dearer than themselves. Narcissism had to be a plant, and a flowering plant at that. Theirs but for the plucking hand and the grazing herbivore seems a safe and simple life, content with humble ways, of infinite meditation. But man, condemned to walk, takes himself with him. 'What exile leaves himself behind?' Horace asked. The soul is a fault which never escapes itself; we bring it back and withdraw it into itself. 'In solitude be to thyself a throng,' urged Tibullus. Virtue, says Antisthenes, is content with itself, without rules, without words, without deeds. Nowadays we have a thousand gurus to teach us to stand on our heads . . . to meditate transcendently, to blast our minds with mescaline, to take up the Tibetan Book of the Dead, to chant namjogorengetio . . . to escape the horrible boredom that makes us bite our hands and neither fear the final day nor wish for it. But where do minds go, where do they come from? The things human beings construct have no connection with whatever it is a human being is: machines, mazes of streets, classified ads, water-closets, constitutions. And the things that have always been there (one hopes), like clouds, rocks, sky and water, do not have any direct connection with the human lives scurrying among them like inscrutable ants. The appreciation of urban squalor and derelict suburbia in the arts has not changed this but actually seems to reinforce the alienation of mind from mind-created matter. The sombre independence of landscape and cosmic prospect from human consciousness and human striving instils in me fears of something radically missing from my own make-up. We may as well not be there at all. It is this not-being-there which appeals to me in music; yet when it is powerful enough it inspires us with the deep and opposite thereness of everything that is human. The force is so akin to the strange glue that holds and that sticks everything together, remote from understanding, that we fall back on demonic terminology to explain it. Klemperer's interpretation of Beethoven best exemplifies this.

Stravinsky's macabre dances also tap their spirit from it. The listener, subtracted utterly, from himself, opens his life's door to the demon's knock. Maillol's nude bathers by the sea contort themselves with the enchanted gallery of the terrible dance which takes place in the very bright and sheer colours of a sweltering noonday. The connection is made between nightmare and daylight. It is the inaudible sound of a child's mind clenching itself against the blow of sudden life. Then, Hamlet begins to think that fortune is better advised than us, that, as Menander said, chance decides matters better than ourselves.

Beginning to live over again, having more provisions for the road than I have road left. Like Cato the Censor, learning Greek in his old age, I am learning to speak just when I need to learn to be silent forever. Words are an empty bag, a rowing round seven miles of it all. Their bells at Easter follow her mountains ringing on a donkey and fire sits hardy when winter loves an old hag. I am burnt on the breakteeth words. Their timeless sneer to all. Meaning leaks in through holes in the roof and drums softly here and there collecting in puddles that soon extend their tentacles all over the floor where I watch the gashes in my wrists leak faster and faster with meaning to flood beyond recognition my embittered days with Blanche Goodfatum, Amazon. And we grew to know less and less of each other. Yet the memory would not set into the setting sun, that green and frozen glance to the wide blue sea where broken hearts are wrecked out of their wounds. A blind sky bleached white the intellect of human bone, skinning the emotions from the fracture to reveal the grief underneath. And the mirror reveals me, a naked and vulnerable fact.