



Sparrows fly around the building in flocks of fifty or more, like wasp swarms, bolting like bullets into russet shadows of the trees, bathing in dust like miniature hens nesting, loud and fearless, deriving insolence from numbers, claiming undisputed domain over that which no one bothered to desire, the thin air, the uninhabitable space.

The wristband of his watch tore. It didn't snap entirely. To prevent it from slipping off his wrist he took the watch off. Immediately the hand felt lighter, it felt bare. To mark the place that the watch once occupied there remains a strip of pale skin, with hairs more fair and fine than the hairs of the forearm. Without a timepiece on it, his left hand seems to have lost its purpose, he will not look at the limb for days.

She is pretending to be asleep. Spots of light explode softly between her shut eyelids. A distant ambulance whelps a high-pitched cry, leaving it to linger in the patchwork silence of numberless small noises. Soon the refrigerator develops a mock siren undertone, neighbor's radio signals with a semblance of an emergency buried deep into the peep of the electric organ, her ears distort every sound by adding to it a touch of irrelevant, unobtrusive, simple, everyday alarm. She's not pretending in order to trick him. She hopes to trick herself.

He thinks of himself as a man who thinks time is of importance to him. The idea of carrying time on his left wrist was both soothing and demanding. Believing that time is of importance to him reassured him that he was of importance to time -it would not run out on him, he would not run out of time. The watch had been his half of the cuffs that chained him to the other convict, the two of them each other's prisoner. He thought If I happened to die, time would drag on my body forever.

On the floor, next to her feet, newspapers lie strewn, grey, sapless, open at the Personals section, ready and set to flit on a waft of breeze that would wafer underneath the backdoor and lick them up to the opposite corner. She seeks him: decent, attractive, smoker, fun, slender, Catholic. He seeks her: honest, employed, affectionate, driving, heterosexual, passionate. They seek him. Her seeks they.

He will carry the watch with the torn wristband in the coin pocket of his jeans for a week before changing his pants. Time will get washed with a pair of dirty jeans and will not survive it. He will think it will be possible to maintain things as they are, he'll consider himself able to live up to the continuously lowered expectations, maintain the level of low expectations, low risk, invest nothing to gain nothing which would raise the stakes and risk losing it all. All? Peace, he'll think, he had peace.

She has nothing to get up for. And has peace lying like this, sitting on her chest, a midget in coveralls, or a child. Lies still so as not to disturb it, waiting for him to notice the sparrows.

And good health too. Aren't these things the most important after all?

She grew up in a she world. Her mother a lioness, her grandmother a widow, great grandmother managing the farm by herself. Chopping wood, feeding big, man-size hogs, harvesting, bent and breathless, shoulder-to-shoulder with farm hands, cutting golden wheat with a tamed sickle. And when her time came, great grandmother, elegant, tidy and clean like a school girl, in her early eighties commandeering and righteous; when the right moment came, a sultry summer night, moonless, just before sleeping, windows hopelessly yawning for a breath of air, her daughters, sons, grandchildren with their mothers turning ceaselessly on sweaty beds in big rooms of the big stone house, her favorite great grandson hidden on the roof eaten by voracious mosquitoes counting mute shining planets... It's a night so still that it echoes with cows grazing, during the burning day they only lie and pant in the shadows; the wooden stairs creak under tiny great grandmother's body, her dry naked feet, long white nightgown, gray braid hanging quietly like a rope in a bell-tower just before noon, in her firm hands two woolen quilts she went downstairs to the fir-wood armoire for, it was cold in her bed, it is even now when she is climbing up to her empty room. Passing by her quiet progeny she is thinking 'They'll be fine' yet she's a little bit angry 'They take me for granted, yes they do, like I've always been here and always will'. Or maybe she just hasn't strength enough to think about them now, she did that her whole life, spread herself like yellow butter for them to eat, her sinewy, broken-in body, with no pleasures but collective ones, family ones, all for once and once for always. To cover that little eating and less drinking body of hers, to hide for a while from the commitments, to rest. It's a silent pain that grabs her chest, not especially potent, not even sharp enough, but it takes her, she knows, it takes the blankets from her hands, they fall silently to the floor, it takes her right away now, with not a whisper, not a sound.

She just tipped over, like a sparrow, grandmother would say, describing how Dobrila, great grandmother's favorite great grandson returning to his room chased by bloodthirsty mosquitoes off the hot moonless roof yelled, rousing the house from sleep. Ma, grandma, it's great grandma! Like a tiny little sparrow who, having served well, God and Nature and its own kind, without bothering anyone, softly fluttered away.

But how did it happen that staying in one place is a problem for us?

In the last eight years we moved four times, picking up everything we had, leaving behind anything we couldn't carry. We weren't pursued by anyone, or anything, apart from the feeling that we had overstayed our welcome. We seem to have a knack for using up places, depleting them of any meaning or importance, at least to the two us. A place is nothing but a place, any place will do just nicely, thank you. In between arriving and leaving you try to live, they don't let you, you fight, sometimes win, sometime lose, but there comes a point when you say Fuck it, pick up your junk and you're on your way.

We start packing up when we finally empty that last box from our previous move. Books go first because we don't read them all at once, although the one on the bottom of the pile we had put away is usually the one we most want. Winter clothes follow because there's no way to travel except to travel toward the summer. We stop cleaning our apartment regularly, especially if it wasn't clean to begin with. A week before we planned to, we're ready to go, so we live that last week out of boxes. If we were to die in that last week we wouldn't be trouble for anyone, except that even if it would be an accident, even if it would be natural, everybody would be convinced we had committed suicide. And wouldn't they have a ball of it? The stories they would tell make our eyes water, it would be the greatest story that'll never get told, so put your notebooks away.

We walk around our place in nothing but underwear. If we go out, we go out each in one and the same pair of jeans and a shirt that's crying for a wash. All our other clothes are packed, except those we'll need for the trip. Time gradually slows down to a halt. The rust from the wheel of time makes us noxious. We grit our teeth to keep our insides in. The air reeks of burnt gasoline, as we swallow it, it lines our stomachs with oily discharge. Prepared like this they can digest the hardest rocks of the road, after that the food from the roadside cafés is baby food to us, we'll eat whatever they have to offer and chew up their coffee-stained counters as well. But for the time being, we walk around our place in underwear. Like generals assessing losses after a bloody carnage from a hill from which one can see only another hill. Even the best of our underwear is packed away and we look through each other's holes and laugh, tattered as if we've been shot at, but instead of retreating we're ready to charge.

How did it happen that staying in one place is a problem for us? Maybe it's because we're two people really, trying to be in two places at the same time. One is simply not enough for us. Unless we're talking about one bed, everything else must be submitted in duplicates, triplicates. By our nature we resist the dictate of the number, we wish to be unaccounted for, whenever someone recognizes us as two, man and woman, him and her, we hide inside each other and claim to be one. Whenever someone attempts to sweep us under the category of one of a kind, we double up, duplicate, become two of a kind, or one of two kinds, or two of many kinds; you can't count on ever counting us, because if you even as much as point your finger at either of us we'll turn into one, into three, two, four, she will be him,

and them, and him who is her, and he will be me, and us, and them, and her who is me and you, and them with us makes six, we have identities galore, none of them assumed.

So why should we stay in one place, when we have the audacity to claim the whole world? If we decide we feel really arrogant we'll ask you What do you have to prove your existence? What makes you think you're more than just a figment of our imaginations? What do you have to say in your defense? What evidence do you have that you were not completely made up by the two of us? Why shouldn't you be ignored? Why shouldn't you be taken for granted? What have you done for your neighbor lately? Pissed on his geraniums? And what about your antipode? Did you send a nuclear cloud over for her birthday? You lazy, smug, irrelevant, comfortable, ignorant, righteous, son of a bitch! We're coming to your town and there's nothing you can do about it, because, guess what, it's a free fucking planet.

Oops, did we hurt your feelings?

Good, at least now you know you have any.

Behinds of houses on our street are labyrinths of squeaky wooden stairs dressed in rogue tousled ivy and phthisical mildew. The air is sweetened by the nestling moisture evaporating from dank humus where a wild number of worms (earthworms, eelworms, rainworms), scurrying roaches, confused beetles, nervous flies, feet-dragging snails, silent-working ants, myriad tentacled armies tunnel, hollow, drill, roll and devour every living or dead thing smaller than themselves. Fat cats prey on anything that moves, hyperactive sparrows bathe in puddles, brawny carpenters in dirty undershirts hammer against a usual wall, blasts unsettle coolheaded bats hanging for the roof beams. Alarm clock cannot peep from sleep a student in the midday. A rug receives a hearty wallop -specks of dust the size of snowflakes. The smell of fresh pasta sauce invades the street while another marriage resoundingly gets dissolved in a new episode of *The Rash And The Ravishing*. Buxom Sophia Loren yawns displaying her triangular left breast. Garbage truck wheezes up the street delivering the deteriorating odor of what's left over, behind, after...

Insects and filth, mongrels and house idiots, everything uncultivated, unaccountable, perilous and wild, all which is sick and disobedient is here, abaft, carefully hidden on the seamy side of the yard. The two of them as well, pushed back, concealed in a meek cloudy apartment with books lying on the floor like abandoned infant corpses. It's smelly, and noisy, and unruly in the rear, with many a bystander and not a witness. If put on the spot, they'll all deny that you exist except in a way that a piece of furniture exists in a fully crammed living room. At least no one got shot in the street in more than a year or so, and really, it's a nice neighborhood, if you drive past the whitewashed nifty house fronts and head for the suburbs.

The tail-end kingdom is another story, clumsier and less lustrous. Consistent with its dorsal nature it doesn't receive any FedEx packages, no mail except for the unimaginative bills irritates battalions of boxes bearing unpronounceable foreign names. Someone, no one knows who, is poisoning the dogs. The veterinarian said it could be dangerous for people too, but for now only three mutts suffered the misfortune collectively. Kids found their bodies piled one on top of the other stacked like logs, their violet canine tongues jutting out ineffectually through a suspended bite of naked yellow teeth. What kind of a person would do such a thing? Kids keep their mouths shut, maybe because it was them who piled the bodies like firewood -in school they learned that sickness is traditionally purged with fire.

How can I tell you who I am when you don't really want to know? How can we explain who we is if you cover your ears and seal off your mind? If you want just the confirmation of what you know, you'll never know anything worth knowing. Because no one is what you expect her to be and nothing is as clear as you see it. You, holier-than-thou lady librarian, you are so sure that the people who stop by your desk are merely patrons of the institution that employs you. You perfunctorily check out their obligatory Prousts and self-indulgent Joyces (or on the best of days, bestseller narcotic trance) while in your absentmindedness you already attend the idea of the tonight's ballet performance, and let dead poets and living books listlessly pass you by. And you, mother and father, you cannot ever accept your children to be prophets; losers and skulkers, useless never-do-wells and good-for-nothings, confused immature incompetents, all that is bearable, but no fucking diviners or saviors of the universe in my house!

People get angry if you confuse them, get aggressive, even mean. And we do nothing really, just are what we are, trying to figure out just what that might be, say Hello, together, Good morning, together, Good day and afternoon together, evening and night together... Are you twins or what? Is this Candid Camera?

Take, for example, our landlord. Above us lives a psychology senior who developed a habit of throwing dirty socks and underwear out the window (degenerate progeny of an overindulging mom). At first we thought to tell our landlord about it, but decided against it -once you start complaining, you end up discovering there are more important things to complain about so it seems more prudent to save your credit for the rainier of days. Especially if you are new in the building, while the last time the building was new was seventy years ago. Therefore, you would want to wait for a

really important problem to pop out of a clogged bathtub or an incontinent fridge, and then whine (or, depending on your disposition, thunder) otherwise no one will take you seriously and you'll end up getting on everybody's nerves.

A couple of weeks ago the landlord finally decided to clean up the backyard only to discover, naturally, the dirty sock bowling alley. Instantly we hoped our elephantine patience would pay off in an undergarment-free view of the neighbor's house's unappealing derri re. But instead, our landlord got so upset with the scene that he not only refused to clean up the mess *Outrageous!* (we agree, absolutely), *and to think there are people who don't even have a clean shirt to put on* (well, a dozen dirty socks hardly would resolve that, nevertheless...) but now he doesn't greet us anymore. Since the incriminating evidence was found in the close proximity of our window he logically concluded... Who wouldn't? Sure, a pair of silent unimposing strangers. No good homegrown boy would, no, no... But oddballs from who knows where, blinds drawn, you can only imagine what they're up to, cooped up in there the whole day, not getting out for weeks at a time, at least I never see them... And they ain't on a honeymoon, I tell you that much.

'I don't think I could ever be with another woman.'

'I could become another woman,' she says, and to prove it pushes his head between her thighs, digging her heels in his hips, holds him down there until he all but asphyxiates.

When the phone interrupts us again, we know it's time to disconnect it. It's time to take a break, we've been who the phone company wants us to be for long enough today. When we moved here, we got the line in two days. What took us a bit longer to realize was that we weren't us any longer, as far as the phone company was concerned. In its magnanimity it had decided to grant us the identity of a Black woman. Everybody in town seemed to be wanting to speak with Amy Kaye, the two of us included. She was receiving calls from tired old women with matronly voices that gushed forth from thick trembling throats, skin of their faces and necks folded in flaps of flab, hands transparent from detergent, with thick-wristed arms, bulging toward the elbows like fire hydrants, bones hidden in wraps of flesh, hair thinned and white at the temples, eyes tired, not amused, like headlights lost in a snowstorm, losing contact, losing track, losing ground.

Amy Kaye must have been a wonderful human being, and we would have enjoyed being her were it not for the fact that her admirers were in the habit of wanting to reach her in the very early morning. Some serious-sounding men called Amy. Each of them might have been a father who had chased her out of her childhood home when he found out about his teenager's pregnancy. Now the father called to apologize, to take back the time, to make good of his mistake, but instead of Amy, he got to speak to us, and no matter how much we wanted to provide him with the absolution, we couldn't do that in Amy Kaye's name.

We're not sure what became of the baby, but the chances are Amy Kaye kept it, because we received some automated messages from doctors' offices and dentists' offices reminding us of regular check-ups that were due. They made it sound very important, as if there was an unpaid bill or two concealed under all that concern.

Amy Kaye must have had a very hard time coping with her work (she dabbled in real-estate, life insurance, social work and personal accounting), her child (no calls from any school of any kind), and the rest of her life which included few attempts at romance with even less success. Amy Kaye couldn't have been a passionate woman, in the sense that the life she managed to make for herself didn't leave room enough for passion. But on the other hand, she must have been burning up inside with a desire to let herself go, to run wild, to brush aside her responsibilities, and obey the dictates of her body. At thirty-five, she had some twenty years of existence trussed up by the barbed wire of duty; in other-people years she was well over fifty, her body was hard and strong on the outside, but tender and inexperienced on the inside. She had a command over a set of feelings that would get her through the day, but she had never felt deep fondness, not even for her baby, because the guilt and the responsibility were so overwhelming, and she had no plans that would last her for a week, let alone a year. In short, it was a dirty trick that the phone company pulled on us, forcing us to assume the identity of a sad, lonely woman.

Back in LA we had been chosen to represent a whole family of Latin American immigrants. We received calls from their friends and the extended circle of relatives at all hours of the day and night. As a rule they were timid, did not understand any of the languages we speak and we returned them this favor, they clung to their receivers, kept asking for Marias, Gabriels, a whole Pantheon of saints and angels, none of whom either of us was willing to identify with. We got calls from lawyers. We got calls from doctors as well. Once we even tried to answer the automated message to warn the doctors that they had a wrong number. We hardly received any calls for either of who the two of us thought we were. Everything sounded urgent to us because it concerned a life we were irresponsibly trusted the responsibility for. The family from abroad kept ringing us up. At one point we decided they were calling us from Salvador. At first they giggled, then it seemed they were trying to arrange a drug deal of a sort using a code we weren't familiar with. It amused them how someone could forget their drug code. It amused them so much that it started to annoy them. They weren't pleased with it, not one bit, so in return they did their best to annoy us. Their calls became more frequent, especially at night,

which got us thinking whether they were really calling from Salvador, because they seemed to have known the exact time of sunset in California. It was either that, or they were annoyed as hell and took special pains to find out when the night fell on a different continent altogether in order to better annoy back its inhabitants, the two of us in particular.

The phone would ring.

One of us would pick it up:

'Hello?'

After an unusually long silence a screechy voice would start to parrot us:

'Hello?... Hello?... Hello?... Hello?...'

The only even remotely adequate revenge we could come up with was to not say anything after that but not hang up either. If they were calling from Salvador, we wanted to make sure they would spend as much of their drug money as possible. They sounded young, they sounded like kids with guns, young enough to play childish games, armed enough to do irreversible damage.

'Hello?... Hello?... Hello?...'

We felt sorry for them, for their lost childhood. Pistols they were playing with were used to assassinate their childhood first. We could imagine them sweating under bags of cocaine in the jungle, lugging the heavy guns as if they would save them in case the police decided to raid the plant. They totted their weapons mostly to scare the peasants, and would take them out, black and shiny, from the holsters, now and then, to shoot at bright-colored birds and monkeys of the paradise. At night they would gather under a sagging tarpaulin and call their relatives over a satellite phone.

'Hello?... Hello?...'

Their anger for not getting through was understandable. We felt for them, but they never returned the favor. They were some persistent youths.

'Hello?...'

Finally, as persistent as they were, they would give up. Silence gets to anyone in time. It's the universal language of death. By being silent you not only tell the person you're not speaking to that he or she does not exist, but also voice a doubt that they have ever existed. With silence you expunge a person easier than a name from a blackboard. What is left is nothingness, *tabula rasa*, black board, the universe, the night, the infinite empty space, and whoever you deal with in such a way has as much opportunity for protest as does a line of chalk.

But why would a person like Amy Kaye suddenly decide to cancel her phone service without letting all these people who keep calling us know about it? Why would she commit herself to silence? There's no doubt she was alone. Her child was maybe getting ready to start school next fall. But if she had her first child at fifteen, at thirty five that child would be at college by now, that child could have a child starting school next fall, Amy Kaye could be a thirty-five year old grandmother, her child could be dead and she forced to take care of her child's child as if it were her own, and nobody would guess, except those who know her, those she didn't let in on her secret, that she was changing her number.

None of it made much sense until a day ago, when during the time we were out to the grocery store and the library and the gym we received five messages on our answering machine. Each message was an automated call from the Cuyahoga County Penitentiary informing us that an inmate of theirs was requesting a collect call. In each of the messages the prison machine required the inmate to identify himself by filling in his name. Each of the five times he pronounced his name differently as if he didn't care about it very much.

He said:

'Shaun.'

Was this the romantic flame who proved to be burning out of control, too unstable, too unreliable for Amy Kaye to invest the rest of her life in a relationship with? He must have done some damage to her heart, probably even her furniture, we certainly hoped he hadn't hurt her. He couldn't have killed her, that much we could guess, although there was no knowing it for sure, because someone in a state of mind that would lead to a murder wouldn't necessarily be aware that he's calling his dead victim.

'Sean.'

Could this be the father of Amy's child, the child she had when she was a child herself? Maybe he had been in prison all this time, but for what crime? Murder seemed again to be the most likely answer. Could it be Romeo who shot or knifed Tybalt, calling Juliet, now that he was going to get paroled? But he didn't say his name was Romeo.

'Shawn.'

We could sense the tension in his voice that didn't come solely from the fact that he was conversing with a prison machine. This was the third time he was trying to make the call he didn't want to make. Murder was all we could come up with, which probably says more about us than about him. We knew nothing about Amy Kaye, yet her decision to drop her life on us, on anyone the phone company chose to, provided us with the license to imagine it.

'Sown.'

As in 'What you sow is what you reap' and Sown was ripe for the reaping. We suspected, after hearing him say his name four times, that he was a kind of person who never goes away. He brings his mistakes to other people's doors like bouquets of roses or fruit baskets. He'll help you bring home your new fridge, complaining how heavy it is to the point where you offer to pay him for his trouble but, no, he magnanimously shoos the money away, only to ask you to borrow him an even bigger sum, only to sneak into your home while you're out and take your new fridge, this time not too heavy, all by himself.

'Your son.'

So this is the man who made a grandmother of Amy Kaye, the fruit of her teenage passion, taking up his family trade of generating bad luck. All grown up to that tender age when one receives no more sympathy, no more allowances, when the first error of judgment could become the rest of one's life. A set of double standards is applied to everybody, and in short it boils down to the reasoning that those who make it are something special, something other than the rest of us, and those who don't make it have no one but themselves to blame.

The only way to escape blaming oneself is to change who you are, which is exactly what Amy Kaye did by changing her number. She decided to change all her numbers, she ran away with her son's son, not a mother at fifteen anymore, and grandmother at thirty five, but a mother at thirty five looking forward to becoming a grandmother at sixty. She probably even lost some weight, changed license plates on her car, moved to another ZIP code, another street, another street number. She didn't let anyone know about it, would have liked it best if she had been able not to let herself know about it. People have the right to second chances, especially if they didn't stand a chance to begin with. People have the right to be happy.

So following her example we decide we want to be somebody else too, we disconnect our phone and we're no longer Amy Kaye, we're no longer a Latin American immigrant family, we're not who the phone company wants us to be, we're not even who we thought we are, not even who we're supposed to be, we're not allowed to be who we want to be.

Who are we then?

I go to the gym to watch the reflection of myself sweat in the mirror. I step on the treadmill as if it were the assembly line of the mind. Once caught in the machine I'm racing to stay in place, it's so absurd it's hard to believe any benefit can come out of it, I burn four, five hundred calories to lessen the burden of my body on my thoughts.

All the while you run beside me, and no matter how slow one of us is, or how fast the other, we always stay shoulder to shoulder. You hardly break a sweat, I rain on the black plastic of the contraption, see the drops depart from my brow, divorce from my skin to plunge between two strokes of my feet, hit the rubber belt, burst.

A dozen or so people run along with us. I try not to notice them to feel less ridiculous myself. Everybody keeps spinning their wheels with complete rat-like dedication. But it's the mirrors that we wanted and there's no way to escape them now. Sometimes I try to look at men, look at women, their sweat-soaked shirts gripping their bodies, round mounds of flesh in motion, I look at you too, in an attempt to stimulate my libido to prove to myself I'm human, but it doesn't work, because I'm not, not in here.

Any tender feelings I'm able to summon are drained into the machine; it milks my humanity, transferring it into kinetic energy shredded into fine strips or granulated into pinhead-size pellets that get dispersed in the barren space like fertilizer. What happens to this wasted energy next? Anybody's guess is as good as mine. You say we all feed on it, involuntarily, according to you, human discourse grows on it like a lawn, rain of our words falls, dissolves the pellets of pure energy, the mixture soaks the ground between people who stand next to each other like blades of grass, we suck it up, the nutritious tonic, and, hopefully, think. Only to you our hair looks more like roots than our feet, so in reality we stand on our heads, staying on their entire lives at the very place we had sprouted out from, the person closest to us is the person closest to us, yet we like to imagine our world differently, we like to believe we are different from other plants, so we dream about our elaborate searches the product of which is the realization that the person closest to us is the person closest to us.

I wipe my forehead. I'm ready to go home.\*

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\* If the greatest thing we ever do turns out to be the fact that we are together, we wouldn't be disappointed, we could live with that. What's more, we're sure that's what we want to do, we want the unit for measuring eternity to be named after us. Only not after us, but in our lifetime, we want to surprise people by how durable we'll get, we want generations to be in awe of us and the span of our existence, then generations after them to completely forget about us, to live in denial of our practical endlessness, then further generations that will follow to discover us all over again. We want to see the next new world when it becomes a very old one. We want to witness the same mistakes repeated to the point of being overcome, when history reaches a point of dissolving. We want to be able to obtain the memory of the stages of evolution of the human kind. We want to be the only old people in the world of people that are not even our species anymore. We want them to show respect for our brittle bones, revere the freshness of our minds, and to leave us alone without ever needing to be told to do so. We want enough time to read our whole life from a book with every page a book of its own, every page of which a book of its own, every page book of its own. Then... turn a fresh leaf.

'But what about people who always need someone else, someone new to be happy?'

'The truth is you are with one particular person your whole life, no matter if that one person turns out to be many. The stages of a relationship that hadn't worked out are necessarily repeated in every new relationship, regardless of how far that new relationship can take you. So in a way there is but one relationship and one or more people to go through it with.'

'What you are saying is that people cannot be unfaithful to each other, because if they are they are actually being true to themselves, and to that other, new person with whom they might realize to the fullest that one and the same relationship they are pursuing? The only one you can possibly be untrue to is yourself if you remain with a person with whom you're unable to experience true union? That is, if anything, very convenient.'

'But people are all about convenience, we live in an egoistical world were the only opportunity for honest altruism exists if you recognize the other as yourself, as the intrinsic part of who you are. Anyone who considers oneself as complete, whole, rounded has no interest in interests of other people. Sure, an egoist can use other people to reach his own personal goals, and some of the other person's goals can be achieved in the process of mutual exploitation, but complete, total relationship is impossible unless you actually see the other as yourself, unless your identities offer you the possibility of another, new, joint identity that will represent who both of you are. Then true relationship becomes true convenience. The correct things are always the easiest to do, simply because they are always correct. The trick is only to put one's self in the role of the beneficiary of every situation. You cannot do that if your ego does not include the other as well. The ultimate altruist will be the person with an ego large enough to encompass the entire world. Problems do not arise when a person is an egoist but when there is a limit to that person's egoism, when a line is drawn between who I am and who the other is. All the horrors of this world stem from altruism, a person is capable of doing anything for and to the other if one believes one is not doing it for or to one's self. We are at our cruelest when our actions are aimed at benefiting the other, and for as long as there is the other from whom we can separate and distinct ourselves, we will hurt him, or her, or them in our limited egoism masked as limitless selflessness.'

'What about the two of us?'

'We cannot differentiate between the two of us, and since the world is a product of our joined minds, we regard it as a part of ourselves as well, only we probably don't see it as real as we think we are, or maybe we do, but we don't take ourselves all that seriously in that we take ourselves too seriously, which is why we can take things as lightly as we please, which usually means we'll take anything too seriously, just for the fun of it, just to feel real enough to be hurt, in order to feel real joy, in order to be happy, in order to be happy being us, in order to be us.'

Look at the clock. It's as big as his head, clean, flat, white-faced. How clever it was of someone to decide to fold a day in two. I've never seen a clock with a dial for each hour, though someone must have made one, I'm sure, someone had already made everything that's to be made, and all that remains is for someone to see it all. Don't suppose it's beyond the skills of some fine mechanic to unfold the day. To think just how much precious metal and hours of toil would have been saved if someone had only thought of folding the day twice. Today we'd have a half-moon instead of a full one, but wouldn't be confused not one bit about which quarter of the day it is, which six hours we inhabit. The hands of the clocks would simply go back and forth, like windshield wipers, no one would think it strange, same as no one thinks it's strange that the hands of the ordinary clocks and watches turn round and round, persistent, obstinate. No one thinks it rude, vulgar, defeatist, nihilistic, no one takes it personally that by a decree or a lack of better judgment by an ancient watchmaker people today all over the world chase time instead of being chased by it. Fold the day thrice and it would be caught like an insect inside of a pie-slice, every trice kept safe, imprisoned. And as one would keep folding the day, the instances would frantically scurry in fear of being crushed by the narrowing walls of the timepiece, until they would be broken and tamed, trained to march like ants to the rhythm of the metronome. Once reduced to its shortest segment, time would no more be of essence, and we'd take our clocks down from the walls, take batteries out of them and pile them all in a big building where no one would ever visit them, and we would call these buildings the Museums Of Time, only no one would be able to tell anymore what it is, what was that... what did you call it? Time?\*

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\* Don't laugh when I say dog.

I knew an old lady once, she was walking her dog. It was a dog that liked to jump up on people's knees, leave mud stains on their trousers. In summer it would leave mulberry stains on my trousers, when I'd stop to say hello to the old lady who was living in the same apartment building as I was. The dog would dig with its pointy nose under women's dresses, sometimes it would press its snout against men's testicles then growl at their erections.

I was very alone at that time, and in need of someone's, anyone's kindness. Not even kindness, attention would usually suffice. Which explains why I'd stop to say hello and discuss the weather with old ladies who didn't have anything to offer and who were most of them surprised that I even noticed them, which would depress me, usually, because there I was, nobody at all noticing me, and who was I to notice anybody at all, especially an old lady with a bothersome dog, an old lady who was so old that she was almost transparent and hadn't been very nice, or very likable when she was at

Once, he was told the story many a time, his grandfather had to drive across the whole continent and back to attend to some business of a sort. Of what sort he was never told. He. The boy. The son of a son. The old man had to drive alone for thousands of miles, all the way to the other side of the country, the continent, he was told, and never a brave man, he got there in three days flat, did the thing that was expected of him, and started for home the very next day, after a night in a bar of the hotel he was staying in, watching people, after a shower, a shave, and a change of shirt.

He returned home a month later, in a clean shirt, shaven clean, his eyes clean, waved Hello to the neighbor, kissed the wife, kissed the children. When they told him he had been missing for a month first he laughed, then he didn't, then he cried so hard that everybody, the police, the wife, the neighbors, the children, none of them dared to ask where had he been. From that time on everybody kept a close eye on him, but since he never again displayed any such or other peculiarity of character, since he had picked up where he had left off doing what was expected of him, they all decided to let it be.

The rest of the story, its warm, pulsating innards, the adventure that is merely hinted by the frame, could only be imagined. The mere size of the land was what got grandfather across the land in three days flat. He didn't know anything about cars except that they need gas, and oil, and water, so he gassed and oiled and watered his car, praying that it wouldn't let him down. The highways stretched like rubber bands, but he managed to get to the end of them as was expected of him. Because, cars run on gas and oil and water, but people best run on fear. And as much as he feared the life that patiently waited for him at the end of his trip, grandfather was more terrified by what he discovered between two coasts.

The land was vast and, for the better part of it, empty, not very many people lived there and even less many people showed that they lived there, and it dawned on him that a man could live there without anything ever expected of him but to live, which was hard because there wasn't anything out there, but it was easy too, because there was no one who would witness one's failures, not that there wasn't anyone, or that the failure there was unperceivable, but that to fail there was to die. People die everywhere, and it doesn't mean that they fail, but elsewhere to fail is to live in a way that is perceived as a failure, when the truth is that all living should be good, some of it better, some less so, but you can't fail unless others convince you you have, and they can't convince you when they're not around to do so, therefore alone in a big land is the only way for a man to live, same as we're born and we die. Alone.

As we write these pages do we want to talk to our reader, do we want our reader to talk back, respond with another work of art? Is it necessary that we know of it? Or will we necessarily know, recognize what connects us, how we inspired each other? The world consists of miniature spheres of interests, like a buckshot-filled hourglass, making it almost impossible to break through membranes of each membership, talk to a peasant in the northeast of China, an English lady, the sports editor of *The New York Times*.

It appears that you can commune only with those who are aspiring: aspiring Chinese peasants, aspiring ladies, aspiring journalists, actors, musicians, managers, street sweepers, aspiring because they are in motion, looking for communication, looking to connect. There exist people who are resigned to one place, to a position they wanted to be in. They might be dissatisfied with its many aspects, but in general they like it, and they don't communicate outside their immediate circle, don't miss anything or even consider that something might be missing. Then there are those who are stuck, unhappy with where they find themselves to be, but afraid to communicate, desperate for a savior, but afraid to save themselves or rescue their neighbor. Finally, there are people in motion, those understanding they are missing out

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her nicest and most likable, an old lady whom I wouldn't even prefer to be friends with when she was young, and whom I particularly disliked now when she was almost about to fade away.

And she noticed it, and she asked.

Why don't you like dogs very much?

Our building had been second to last on that side of the street. It was where the neighborhood had started to go bad, like a bruised apple. The only old women who lived in that part of the street were apprehensive of everybody else, especially young people, even though they themselves were worse than the neighborhood could ever get. Each of them had a dog, to attract sympathy, but repel intruders, bark at postmen, and bare teeth at passers-by through iron fences.

Everybody else likes dogs very much. I like dogs too, I just don't like them very much, and I don't think they suffer too much from me not liking them very much. In fact, I think they don't suffer at all. The only thing I resent about dogs is the way they allow themselves to be used by unscrupulous people. I see those people everywhere, fishing for friends with that much dog meat on a short leash. Trawling for acquaintances, for some casual diversion, a word or two of acknowledgement of their existence, some consideration and kindness that would rub off on them as strangers rub their dogs' bellies or offer hands to be licked. Dogs are magnets for attention their masters never get enough of – if I die before I do some good I can always look forward to reincarnate as a handsome dog in America. If I do some good before I die I will find myself in danger of coming back black, or brown, or any other shade of poor and invisible.

So this is my beef with dogs, not a cause, but a symptom of all or some things that are very wrong.

on something, those willing to look for what's missing, some clumsier in their search, some more skilful -those are the ones you can communicate with.

In a land of many people some have learned to manipulate events in order to sap the energy generated by the masses. Contrary to that, this book is a pool of energy to which people can contribute or drink from, recognize and sense each other in, converse to each other through memories, desires, thoughts, innuendos, and concepts. This book is an aspiring book, it aspires to find friends, interlocutors, created to communicate something, but more importantly to communicate with someone, with more someones, as many someones as there are.

Windows are undone shirttails in a dying summer afternoon when the overpowering smell of the decomposing garbage dissipates its impertinent salsa bouquet through the perspiring rooms. The ultimate stage of a mute dialogue dribbles out of bloated trashcans testifying to the glory of the intolerant neighborliness; I sniff yours, you sniff mine, we become blood kin initiated into the family by a gnat-veiled vomit valiantly abandoned in the back of our yard. Underneath my kitchen window, next to your TV room: we exchange the exhausts of our deflated bellies while glutting the black bags of a good, fed life. This is how the poor live. This is how people interact. Inhaling each other's existence.

True, one could simply shut the windows and release the empty frostiness of an air-conditioner, bare and plastic, with its pumping pulse efficiently rubbing out the foul smelling other. But by doing that you'd be deleting yourself. That's why we keep Mr. Clean away; don't want him to erase our traces. By trading heavy odors we acknowledge decay as the currency of life. Putrefaction is the deepest form of intimacy, the proof of our continuation. That is why we keep our dead and our garbage around, to draw from them the sense of being alive, for dead people educate the living, and live people are happy people, we, the hating hated neighbors.

Fuck the world.

So they will. One person at a time. But they'll keep their eyes on package deals, any proposal that would speed up the process. A family discount, though they're not family proper, but can impersonate one if need be.\*

Last night I had a dream. It involved lots of running, dodging things, escaping dangers and disasters; the whole world was coming to an end for no particular reason I can remember now. All I do remember is that there was this woman there, well over fifty, in fact I remember wondering in my dream if she was old enough to be my mother. I felt it was my responsibility to save her, beside her there hadn't been anyone else I could help. Eventually the world did end, the woman and me were the only people left alive.

She looked tired, but relieved. I felt nothing in particular, but when I looked at her I immediately knew what she was thinking. It was up to us to recreate the human race anew. She seemed to be considering it. I found it to be absurd. In a way it was funny. What were the chances of only two people staying alive? What if only one of us had made it? Or what if the only two people left alive were of the same sex? In other words, the woman and I have beaten the odds, it seemed to me we could be quite pleased with ourselves without attempting to make anything more out of it.

I was in no way interested in starting a new race with this woman, not that she was unattractive, but she seemed to be too old, and what was worse, it was the kind of old which she wasn't really aware of, she still saw herself capable of the monumental task of bearing swarms of children, children she would leave to me and to incest. In other words, she was prepared to start a brand new mess of things but not to see it through, so, I guess, she was the kind of old where she was aware of her age but impudent enough to assume a responsibility others would have to fulfill on her behalf. In yet other words, yes, she was ready to fuck me and from then on be known as the Mother Of All Humanity, but she was not prepared to fuck our son as well. So, I remember, I was thinking That won't fly, lady, when I woke up.

'What did the woman look like?'

'I told you, she was old.'

'Did she look anything like me? Was that me you were dreaming of, me old and presumptuous?'

'No, I don't think so. She looked too timid and at the same time perverse enough, like someone's favorite elementary school teacher.'

'Someone's?'

'Not mine, but you know the type, the type of a person who knows what needs to be done, doesn't mind taking the credit for it, but also knows who's going to do it for her.'

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\* The effect of sexual attraction in social contacts is highly under-recognized. Or maybe we have just been oblivious to the unspoken law according to which people have interest in other people only if they would like, or if they think, they could fuck them. In that sense, two people insisting on staying constantly together are not only viewed as crazy, but could also be regarded as a sort of antisocial experiment.

'I didn't know school teachers are like that?'

'Some of them are. Some draw erotic pleasure from molding young minds, some feel they are giving you knowledge just by rubbing your head against their bellies, some teachers can only teach you that they themselves are failed human beings and that's it.'

'What is a failed human being anyway?'

'One that enjoys being rather than doing.'

Now, *I* am the lazy one and don't write, don't write enough or at all, although it is you who is bedridden, in the middle of the morning, floating in depression like a drunken moth in a vat of boiling vinegar.

I wash my hands three, four, five times; you complain that I use up our soaps too quickly, you always complain, this morning and these days which don't stop dragging by with the sultriness of unanswered mail; in order not to let the viruses infest my body, pimples flowering on my face, something's wrong with the vegetables we eat, maybe they fertilize them with sewage.

What do you imagine your audience should be like?

They shouldn't be asking barren pragmatic questions, to begin with.

We edit a magazine. Post people's writings on the Internet hoping they'd connect. But each of those whom we publish doesn't read any of the other texts available in the same issue. Each just reads one's self and invites one's friends to read only one's own texts. It's a vicious circle. We know because we can track them online through the web site's traffic report. It is sad.

That's why he's in bed, couldn't possibly be that tired, it's almost noon now, babbling useless aphorisms like What's the point of it all? and Why are we doing it?

Everybody is an audience, otherwise literature becomes just another infantile ΒΣΨ, ΓΦΒ, Skull And Bones, Church Of Solemn Dawn plaything for a group of chosen saints-or-sinners who pat each other on the back and indulge in collective masturbation.

Tom Cruise said that there are no pills for depression, just get out of bed, go to the gym and work it off. But the problem is how to get out of bed? Maybe employ someone to wear you there, like a limp pullover that suits no season. Find someone who will do a bunch of other things for you as well: have sex with and instead of you, so that you don't have to do anything, just enjoy yourself, reap the culmination, no sweat, no engagement, someone to wash the dishes, tell you stories, live instead of you.

A sparrow chirps from the windowsill –there is happiness outside. But our place is a quarantine.

'Don't know what's wrong with me, Jack. Haven't been myself lately. I keep forgetting things, you know? Little things. I mean, I could give you a list of them right now, but ask me about them a minute later and I won't remember a thing. I mean, I'll know the list, I'll know those are the things I keep forgetting, but ask me to tell you something about them and I'll just recite you the whole list. It's not that I don't know what these things are, but I just wouldn't be able to tell you without giving you the whole list, and once I give you the list, none of the individual things seem to matter anymore, each of them is meaningless by itself, you know? They retain meaning only if they're placed in a proper sequence, but what I wonder is what use is the sequence if it consists of things that don't matter by themselves.'

She merely pointed out that, as a rule, it's she who approaches other people. Why? she asked. Why indeed? Because she is a more determined one, not that it says anything about the quality of her decisions, but she makes them with less fuss, though that doesn't prevent her from fussing over her decisions once she has made them, but she makes them... Well, actually, that's not entirely true, when it comes to things, objects, issues, problems, car trouble, computer trouble, bills... Well, actually, no, it's easier for her to make decisions about those things as well. It's not that he doesn't come up with solutions, but there often seems to be more than one solution, but even when there's really only one solution, only one thing he'd go for, and usually things are pretty straightforward (things are, not people) he always feels more comfortable with her actually making the decision, and he naturally going along, and, she's right, it's more than mere gentlemanly holding of the door, he enjoys the shelter she provides him with.

'Well, I don't know what to tell you, Peter. I think it's something you should have checked. Today we have ways of checking these things, and it might not be anything serious, in fact, I'll bet you anything it's not that serious at all, might be just a question of hormonal imbalance, might be something two or three pills in the morning would take care of just nicely.'

But it shouldn't make any difference, should it? His behind is fixed firm to the moist surface of the bench. She'd be horrified by the prospects of armies of germs invading his genitals, right now, right this moment. He has ideas, same as she. Most of his ideas are good enough. They get chosen to get acted upon about as often as hers do. It's just that when it comes to people he likes taking his time, the scenes, the exchanges of words, glances, movements, he plays

them out in his head, repeatedly, until he's sure about the proper sequence, the most promising course of action, by which time he'll be so worked up by the rehearsals that the premiere would lose any appeal, the snippets of successful takes would blend into one perfect reel of film that cannot be matched by anything you'd find at the evening's stage.

'But, listen...'

She, on the other hand, appreciates the drama, her spontaneity fuels it, the act is the trigger of the experience, the bliss and the agony, not their end. In both cases it all boils down to emotions, to feel is the legitimate reason for living, but for her the emotional life makes sense only when split between reality and conception, relationships with others need to be consummated to perpetuate emotions, to establish an interface with the world, connect, share ideas, bodily fluids, swap consciousnesses, exchange ideas of the self, exchange ideas of mutual existence, testify. Her reaction to the world is infinitely more severe, more consuming, as if her entire being is strung on a beam of energy in flux, like a spider climbing upward on a thread it creates, a dynamic knot of time, space and senses traveling on the glass wool weaving of the world, like a morsel devouring the eater, a wedding band girding a whale, silver of a mirror-eye absorbing the world to transform it into the expanse of the mind, valve, keyhole, solar-powered firefly. He plucks aimlessly at his pubic hair, wet towel sitting on his knees, feet uncomfortably wet on top of still glistening flip-flops. She's something else.

'But, listen, you need to have this matter looked into. As a matter a fact, why don't you give me a call next week, or better yet, simply show up, come by my office next week, you know everybody there, and I'll let them know they can expect you. I mean, I'm pretty positive it's nothing to get yourself worked up about, these things are pretty standard these days, but we'll need to run some tests.'

Shouldn't some things stay inside, in the dark of the mind? Granted, not everything can or should be premeditated, but there are ways of premeditating spontaneity, reasoning out resolve, there are notes on events that haven't yet occurred, and in all likelihood some of them never will, that are not supposed to be released, opinions, scenarios, fragments, doodlings of the mind, games, hypothetical, problematic, obscene. So is he ever lying to her, that's what she wanted to know. No. But he's not telling her everything either. Some ideas are horrid in their moment of conception, they take time taking shape, he's not lying, he's not distorting the truth, because there is no truth yet born to be distorted. She laughs. She laughed. You only think you're not telling me everything, she said. What she doesn't tell him is that he's telling her everything, and it's exactly because of that that she trusts him. But, listen, he doesn't tell her everything immediately, he tells her everything eventually, and that's why she trusts him. That's what he thinks.

'But, listen...'

What about that time when, after a long while, she agreed to have him occasionally enter her from behind. The idea took possession of his mind, he kept adjusting his erection while they walked through the outskirts of the suburban pastoral, families with small children walking up to them, saying Hellos and How-do-you-dos, and him all the while thinking where could they get their hands on some condoms. 'Twas Sunday, only smokes and lottery tickets at the Customer Service booth of the Giant Eagle; big black shop attendant might have saved some under the counter, where small children can't see them, ask their mothers what are those for, packed like chewing gums, colored like candy, or balloons, so that they wouldn't be sterilized at the mere sight of them, somehow kidnapped back in time, shipped back into their mommas' wombs, reprocessed into silvery organic sludge, pumped out, suctioned by their daddies' pipettes, end up blown like so many small children's noses into devil's own rubber kerchiefs, happy holiday toilet balloons, not bent or squeezed into any shape or size of an animal by a happy-go-lucky clown.

'But, listen, I mean, I'm pretty positive it's nothing to get yourself worked up about, these things are pretty standard these days, but we'll need to run some tests.'

What do you mean? he asked. She meant that he can't prevent himself from having a hard-on just talking about thinking about fucking her in the ass.

'But, listen, it gets worse. Lately I'm having real trouble getting places. It's not that I forget my appointments, I even give myself extra time to get somewhere, but somehow I never end up where I was meant to. You see, every time I need to make a turn I make a left turn. I know one has to make a right turn every once in a while to get where one is going, but all I'm able to make are left turns, till I end up with no turns left. It's like I concentrate real hard on making that first turn left that once I make it, once I go around that corner, there's really no incentive for me to move, to continue, as if the only plan, the only map I have is that single generic turn left around the corner. That's all I've got, that's all I'm stuck with, so if I'm forced to move on, all I can is apply it all over again, find a corner, turn left. It's like having someone in my head constantly giving me wrong directions.'

He can't stop himself from getting a hard-on from thinking about them talking about him thinking about fucking her in the ass.

'Well now, Peter, I really think you should have that checked...'

See?

'It's like having someone in my head constantly giving me wrong directions, you know? Like driving with my wife. She'd always come up with strange directions, but she'd always end up being right. I mean, we'd drive out, and

she'd say turn left here, when it was obviously a wrong thing to do, but you know, I'd make that turn, just for the sake of peace in the house and all, I'd make that turn laughing, saying Whooee, honey, where are we going to end up next? and by some miracle we'd end up just where we were supposed to end up, and I'd ask her Now how did you do that?

He doesn't tell her he jerks off regularly. Takes it for granted that she takes it for granted. His regular practicing of being alone. Whenever the door, or sleep, or tiredness, or lack of things to think about, to say, closes between them, he receives a flash of a feeling that marked most of his life before they met, feeling that fitted him like a skin, except it was cold, separating him from what he saw, heard, felt, or even thought, a complex, elastic feeling not the least an organ of communication with the world, a portable prison, membrane of a cell, a one-way mirror designed for looking inside.

'Listen, Peter, how long is it now since Dinah passed on?'

He prefers being alone in the locker room, but only hearing people's voices helps. The size of the recreation center helps too, walls of lockers dividing the space here into dank, resonant cubbyholes, walls covered with mirrors, brass hangers, shelves, swathed in vapors pouring from batteries of showers and urinals, snouts of wall-mounted blow-dryers, bins with tongues of brown paper hand towels hanging out, algae darkened stone basins stained with pink liquid hand wash drippings, neon tubes twittering above the sweat-soap-spit-steam-semen-snot sodden carpeting, scales in the corner with a single slick black step worn out by bare feet plodding down the never-dry aisle of forget-me-not colored tiles.

'Well, I don't know what to tell you, Jack. It feels like it was yesterday, so it might as well be yesterday. But I get you, I know what you're thinking, I know. You're thinking it's in some way connected to her, right? Well I can tell you right now you're pretty much wrong on that one, Jack. I mean, why would I want to make that left turn now that she's not around to pester me about it? It doesn't make any sense to me. Now, if I'd be making all the right turns, I'd say you'd be on to something. It's like for example getting up in the morning. I still get up on the left side of the bed, like I used to. But if there'd be something wrong with me on account of her, I'd be getting up on her side, wouldn't I Jack?'

He doesn't tell her that he often imagines what his life would be if she would die. He's not so preoccupied with thoughts of his own death. His death doesn't mean anything to him, since it's something he can do nothing about, cannot experience it from its painful side, selfishly prefers to be waiting, rather than be waited for. But if she should die, she'd get promoted out of life, their parallel disrupted, he'd remain imprisoned in the stasis of life, suffering under the weight of memory. Death is an easy way out of their life he'd get stuck with if she should bail on him, leaving him with all the emptiness, funeral arrangements, the will-o'-the-wisp, the bills, explanations, questions and answers, all the world to behold, for all the world to behold, the age, his old age, dependency, triteness, irritation, irrationality, a life incomparably worse than death, a life of junk food and television.

'So you see, Jack, it doesn't solve my problem with those lists of things and wrong turns, so I was wondering if you'd be willing to see me one of these days, not that I'm worried, mind you, but as a sort of a precaution, what do you say?'

He lets the towel fall to the floor and starts dressing. These things and more he doesn't tell her. Does she know them anyway?

'Would you even say it's worth looking into? I mean, I am getting older, so it might be nothing, it might be nothing to get worked up about, right?'

Outside she's waiting for him, or he'll be waiting for her. He might tell her none of this. Or he might tell her about the men's shower room, the steam, the hypnotic rush of the water, what it felt like soaping his genitals, watching himself wash away with the soap, in whirling rivulets, toward the hair-clogged drain grate, the sound of the water erasing him away, taking him outside of the moment, outside and beyond the simple duration of a shower, beyond a second caught and suspended between closed eyelids like lips holding on to the lobe of the ear they want to be listened to by sprouted right in the middle of a palm hidden under the breast under which a heart beating against the drum of the lung slows down... until... it... stops.

'And I'm not, you know, to tell you the truth, I couldn't care less, but she's been on my case for weeks now, so it would be really to set her mind at ease more than anything else. I don't feel there's a problem myself. As a matter a fact, Jack, I feel fit as a fiddle. Haven't had more than a touch of flu for what seems like forever now. Did I tell you about the time...'

Jacket on, he pushes the door. It swings back just barely missing him.

'Yep, uh-hum, fit as a fiddle.'

'I know now what getting older means.'

'When did you discover it? What does it mean?'

'To become older is to become aware of all the things you'll never do, never attempt. When you're younger you have the luxury of believing you can do whatever you want to, but in time you find out certain things have drifted out of your reach. As you age, you're still tempted to try something new, but most of those things are near impossible. Though

they never leave your mind, they haunt you, you know you'll never do any of them, you become acutely aware of your limitations which possibly might make you even better at what you actually do, but your limitations grow as your abilities diminish, until that time when the only thing left for you is to die.'

Lining the curb around the Musician's Tower, in plastic chairs, in calico dresses and woolen vests sit retired Russian immigrants, all ruddy-faced and solemn, wasting no time on perfunctory smiles and articles, definite or indefinite, plotting out their remaining afternoons in a language replete with diminutives and declensions.

'Life is a funnel of opportunity, you might not know it, but with every day you have fewer choices. When you're younger these choices appear to be numberless, as you grow older you start noticing they have reduced in number. You become old when their absence starts to pain you, you go senile, or go mad, or die when the last few grim options close in on you. Age brings about the stifling feeling of claustrophobia, you can't go out the way you came in, can't turn around, can't choose another way, there's only one exit, the exit you know you don't want to take.'

Once they seriously entertained the idea of posting a notice announcing their aspiration to learn Russian. At that time days would pass without them exchanging words with anyone but supermarket cashiers: 'Credit or debit? Cash back?' It seemed like a plan, to have someone to talk to on a regular basis, even if in a foreign language. But then their Internet connection went down, and a week of conversing with the O-800 customer support automatic service smothered their desire for another human voice.

'What do we care, we plan to live forever.'

'Yes, but it's what comes after forever that I'm worried about.'

It's not that grandmother was the first widow in the family. Almost every woman, the remembered as well as the nameless one; back down the aching shadows of a pleached family tree with its brumous crown and dead end branches, with its always hungry farmers, never paid well workers and wild sorcerers (sometimes called revolutionaries, agitators, or simply lazy good-for-nothings); almost every foremother wore sorrow as her garment, for years and years, once put on, it was unwashable, this wretchedness, inexorable, like a life sentence, every wife deprived of her husband, every girl of her fiancée, every dream of its reality. God, gods, Nature, diablerie, mostly armies, wars and illnesses took their men away for good; no, not for any good, but for immense solitude and debilitating pain (he has forsaken me, he, my Lord and my Lover).

Great-grandmother's husband died of galloping consumption, upon returning from war in a foreign country, far East or West, it matters not where from he returned, wounded inside, in his eyes a deep nervous disturbance. He liked birds, song-birds, brown and gray and yellow and red ones, kept them in elegant coops and cages, just for a while, to look at their trembling bodies closely; this haggard soldier with a pair of iron medals of courage cowardly hidden beneath the quilts, deep at the black bottom of the fir-wood armoire. He would hold a bird next to his dry troubled eyes to hear it sing in panic in yearning in hunger for a boundless sky, and then let it go, in a lavender afternoon. Some of them, fluttering little creatures, probably died immediately upon release to the vast everydirectioness, tipped over with their open miniscule wild-beating hearts broken, overwhelmed with freedom; but then again maybe not, maybe in those days people were tougher, animals too.

Great-grandfather died at the age of thirty-three, and though he was sorely missed, everybody, even his children, agreed that he was better off, in peace, safe, not suffering any more. Even his favorite daughter, grandmother, to whom he told stories about the bird world and the vast sky, especially his favorite daughter, eyes inflamed with rage (why did he have to go, why) admitted it was better that this tender, pristine, young man left, departed from pain. With every family memory he became younger still till he was younger than his own children, younger than them all, this beloved father to be no more. He was too fragile for this world, he wouldn't have endured much longer, everyone agreed. It was great-grandmother who was the man of the house ever since he went to war, but especially after he, coughing, not talking much, not talking much at all, just listening to the birds, returned back, which made him, even in his last days, spitting vermilion phlegm in pallid palms, as he was still breathing and walking and observing, turned him into a memory while still alive, a darling, dearest and most valuable, but only a family reminiscence. Mentioned in desolate winter nights to sooth tired bodies and anxious minds.

It was completely different with grandma's husband. Grandfather's absence was felt much more acutely than great-grandfather's, maybe because there were more people, more children to remember him. Besides, grandma never assumed, nor had intention to figure as *pater familias*. Maybe because in one family there couldn't be two *patres familiae*, but probably because she was too similar to her father, tender, kind, cooking and baking, taking care of children, while great-grandmother negotiated pig slaughters and grape harvests with men in the village.

Grandma missed grandfather, which made the whole family miss him, every time male strength was needed. Every evening sullen boys and modest girls longed for the booming laughter of the machinist. The irony of it was that even when alive he was hardly ever home. He was working on ships, sailing the world cooped up in the boiling belly of a merchant ship's engine room, a mole in a mole-hole with no sun or sky or air, inside big ships, greasy and malodorous,

transporting rotting fruit of civilization from one continent to another, sweating against the steaming steel boilers, forever in vapor, fire, and tumult. But when he would make it home, never empty-handed, with strange gifts from strange places like tropical, or polar, or no island at all, it was as if someone had suddenly lit wicks in children's eyes. But these moments didn't last, soon enough his departure would freeze their smiles. He died with a golden ship that ripped open like a woman's underskirt, in the middle of a silent ignorant sea, amidst sharks and sedulous pirate-submarines, where no one spoke his language, our language, and no one could understand his last words whirling with bitter salt water flooding his staring green eyes...

What exists between the two of them is a healthy competition, they are competing for the experience of the same reality, upon noticing something out of the ordinary a race ensues to form it into words, ideas, commit it to the page. Only the world subjected to such scrutiny stands a fair chance for improvement.\*

'Did we lock the door?'

'Yes, we did.'

'Turn off the gas?'

'Yes, we did.'

'Set up the clock?'

'Yes, you did.'

'Did I?'

'Yes, you did, I saw you do it.'

'You did? Should I turn on the light and check?'

'No. I mean, yes, you did set up the clock, and no, we won't turn the light on.'

It would probably make more sense to check all those things before actually going to bed; these questions are predictable, the answers even more so. Very rarely do they actually get up and check the door, faucets, the telephone once more. They are not paranoid, neurotic, or obsessive-compulsive. They don't make much of these queries, don't give them a fraction of a second more of attention than is needed to keep the balance, automatically, the way they take a piss and wash hands not giving it much thought, as something that must be done, with no will involved in it. It is a ritual performed in order to keep the cogs of their composite mechanism well oiled. They do their best to maintain this fine instrument of their double existence in good working condition, running smoothly, without any stalling.

'Did we e-mail the bookstore?'

'Did we make a shopping list for tomorrow?'

'Are you sure we bolted the back door too?'

'You think we might be pregnant?'

'We use condoms.'

'Maybe one got punctured.'

Not that they didn't consider, a couple of times (at least twice a year, to be precise, on nights when they wish they had stayed in bed the whole day) to let go, to leave all the locks unlocked, taps untapped, keyholes opened to be spied through, all these knobs, buttons, latches, screws and wheels unfastened, unscrewed, loose; expose every last bodily cell of vulnerability they've hidden between, fragile, trembling, pulsating; not to care any more, accept that what will be will be. If it's a thief they'll scare the shit out of him by screaming in a foreign language; if he's armed they'll fight him with bare fists and die courageously, like lions-for-a-day... if it's a maniac resting an axe on her throat, commanding him to go down on him, they'll die again, probably a less noble, messier death, the axe buried in her brain, him choking on a chewed-off penis, her eyes still alive in idiotic numbness, his hair instantly turned gray, while the blubbing maniac dials for an ambulance with bloody fingers on their phone.

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\* I listen with my eyes. Look with my ears. Respire through my skin like a toad, the skin spits sweat, fine glistening pearls of it, provoking ringlets of coral rash around my wrists. I sit with my behind on a creaky blue folding chair, one foot under my behind, the other knee under my chin and sweat in nothing but my new underwear.

'Take the noise we make.' She says. 'It's the continuation of a conversation. I blow my nose, you shift in your seat, I walk across the floor, each floorboard turns into a key of an organ with dried up, stiffened bellows for lungs, as if they hadn't been properly fitted when they buried them dead people under here.'

'Who's they? No one was killed at our place.' The windows are open, the back door too but nothing comes in except the persistent whirr of air-condition units with their asses stuck out the windows like well-fed frat pranksters breaking wind, singing long moaning rectal arias, and swell choir they make too, good, strong voices, every each one of them, there's the furtive tenor of Frank Furter, the balmy baritone of Ham Burger.

'No one was killed at our place.'

The fact that they can too easily imagine these things makes them switch all the switches off and pull the blinds down though, when it's dark and they cannot see who's lurking about. Anything else would be completely irresponsible, reckless, like having a swim down the Niagara Falls, or sucking on a quarter.

Takes no particular effort to picture a stupid kid feeling the knob of their unlocked door welcoming him, an illiterate creature in a better pair of sneakers than either of them owns, thus in a way, the material way of our civilization, better off than the two of them; picture that uneducated, wild, futile soul entering their study to steal their obsolete computers, for the sake of a nervous adolescent flam, unable to recognize that this hardware cannot ever be sold, pawned, or given away, not even to his spoiled little niece whom he gave her first cigarette and a promise of a joint. Thus, an almost finished novel and a decent collection of short stories would be gone for good, early in the morning the kid would get tired of lugging about his useless loot and throw it in the garbage -the accumulated dreams, words and pains of a woman and a man disposed off to rot with pesticide cured bananas, empty bottle waters, and rat vomit.

I need to see people making love. I want to see them express love in the streets, schools, in the army, in parliaments and offices, in a white and gray and pink house, courthouses, warehouses, in front of every house. I'm not interested in voyeurism though, no passive observation would satiate my appetite, no orgies either, they imply a limited number of participants, include some, exclude the rest, no better than churches. Enough of gated communities! Release a bolt of high voltage and blow up to smithereens every single fence of steel, melt them to the ground, annihilate.

People live divided on islands in the middle of a black ocean. Before the Chinese and the Vikings discovered America, and afterwards, there was our island and your island, and we were only happy knowing that we are here and you are there. If we decided to communicate we came and conquered, or you came and enslaved -the end and the beginning of the story.

We don't have to love, we can hate each other even more after exchanging first few words, but there must be a possibility of meeting each other, those of us, all of us never destined to meet. There is no point in talking to those who are too similar to us, no point in staring in the mirror. So break it, break the circles to create a larger, all encompassing one where everyone is an insider. Fear not the psychopaths, no matter how small a community you decide to hide in they are already there, you are one of them.

Sunday church bells ring, for all people to hear, for those who recognize the code, or only for those who bow their heads, perform a sequence of standing up and sitting down, shake the priest's hand, registered in parish books. We walk across the Heights in a self-imposed silence of family lawns, big mute houses with shiny mute cars, and all I want is to storm their suburban stucco castles, form my fists into sledgehammers, break, crush, demolish, tear down -doors and windows, gloomy halls and locked rooms, rip out doorknobs, smash the glass and burn the curtains, to hell with entrances and exits, uproot the big oaks you hide behind, Mom, Dad, open up, you have a seagull nesting on your roof, it can stay but the house has got to go, we're coming, we're invading...

The truck driver is a transvestite is a kebab-sucker is a dad is a poet is a gambler; smell of asphalt in the living room; over a hot cup of espresso, truck driver hugs a shy English professor who is a bull-rider who is a waltz dancer who has a fetish for garbage cans; I'm a rubber cock woman, you are hard on men, hardworking people we are, God is inside us every time we fuck we pray, we pry for open privacy; giraffe is an earth-worm is an angel soul is poo is a princess is a pencil on the screen is a robot is menstrual blood is a mouthful.

The manual says be what you are, but I am many, we are legion, how can I be what I am in this world that asks for professionalism, divisions, specificities, areas of interest, a world that demands homogeneity, shelves, belonging, specializations. They are asking only for one side, half a face, one cheek, and let you have a private life on your own, on a side, B-side life, predictable, normal, or it can even be abnormal but it mustn't be more than one.

Only I want, we want, to be everything: artist, baby-sitter, dishwasher. I want to be a mom and a dad, a homo and a hetero, a vagrant and a suburbanite, a cowboy and a bike racer. I want to be another human being and myself, many others, many selves, myself in others, others in me, through my left nostril inhale the dividing line, all the dirt snake-like roads. I want my chest to resound with voices, languages, tongues, teeth and throats, it's crowded inside, pent up, bumping, swollen, jutting, causing tight pain and snug contentment. To surf on California beaches and Arctic ice, I want forests and deserts and the smell of oil, ties and suits and Frei Körper Kultur. I want trains rumbling in my ears and fish in my eyes, blue and golden fish under my nails. I want a dick, and a tail, and a hole in my cheek, a woolen pullover, to chew book pages like fresh green grass, kiss a cow's muzzle, smell the hay, drink a river and piss against the wind, land a punch and receive, be beaten so that I can feel every last bone in my body. It's not enough to be me, not enough to be anyone, not enough to be us, not one life, but many, not one death, many deaths. But not to rush through the other, like a tourist climbing the slanting tower of Pisa, or to settle forever in the other like a gallstone. Lonely ships groan on the horizon of the dawn, they don't pass, don't linger either, but blend -a fusion of pieces that don't fit, hungry to be all and hungry to be me, us, all me, us in all, malleable, meals of a cannibalistic feast, devouring each other, sperm-tasting

sweetener -studies show that the taste of anything can be improved, turned livelier, more intense and hypnotic, into a savor of a good commercial.

This is what we're doing to us, cannot stop thirsting to spread into others as we've entered and enter each other. We want to put on other people's skins the way we exchanged ours, mix words and thoughts in a strong cocktail and never sober up again.

Yet once we're back to our place, you get angry with me because I fail to close the door quickly enough. The snowflakes swarm inside stinging the carpet. Are you crazy? Shut it! We'll freeze, we'll freeze...

The stage is invisible in limelight-studded darkness as the crowd sends the hall out of kilter into fleshy tan-tentacled coils of a millipede. Coaly tint gets exhaled in cigarette puffs, glistening dark on palms sweating, melting with ice, condensed on plastic cups of beer, amber river of beer knotting a tart strap on the starless, moonless moony backdrop, a droning beehive topped with the queen stage huddled with bodies in a three-chord delirium. The noise treks through flesh, eels of sound slither through the froth of ear drums pushing onward, toward the throat thirsty for amnesia, temples pounding with the pulse of presence, serrated beat switched on upon the moment the ticket was torn, allowed to enter, allowed to must have fun.

Testosterone junkies are taking it seriously, diving off the stage onto bent necks of their pals, gnawing on the incongruent sounds, saliva of exhaustion on trim naked torsos. Girls scream, squint searching for desire, where can it be found, sinking into lyrical margaritas, one after another. Parallel masturbation in the graffiti colored restrooms, puddles of piss'n'miss, smell of marijuana evoking the warmth of an open hearth, circling around, lose then find a face again, a glimpse of eyes out of focus, round and round, following the instructions barked from the loudspeakers; noise is the prayer of the night, noise as transcendence into noise... the aesthetics of glassy-eyed synesthesia, sound is the only color.

Recognize yourself in a dreamy gaze of that nineteen year old? Have a feeling you are looking at yourself from fifteen years ago? Possibilities are infinite for a nineteen year old; possibilities are infinite for a thirty year old. We are made of the same material, same sparkling dust, many-colored patches, countless patterns, but one substance, one sacrosanct incestuous blood. Look at that beautiful young man. I can see my face in his, how presumptuous of me, isn't it, yet I recognize my own ambitions and fears in those violet eyes. It's so obvious, can't you see the resemblance? Oh, I'm in love with all the possibilities between that young man and us. The traces of something that won't happen are hurting me like an open wound.

*Why wouldn't it be possible?*

Because he's far from ready to give yet, trained to receive, ungratefully, arrogantly, to pile under himself, no sharing yet, not with me, not with us, someone else will come and take it, deservedly, you have to reward those who show up in the right time at the right place, but we won't be them.

*You're jealous.*

And you're not? Not missing all those opportunities that never materialized to begin with, beautiful ripe fruit of imagination, we reach out, but the branches retreat and the oranges are just gummy-bears, are just sweet illusions. Noise from the loudspeakers. There is a possibility we'll meet again, but again, dreams and yearnings will be obstacles to what could happen. Noise in the mind's loudspeakers, forbidding us from changing the reality, imagined nearness destroying the prospects of proximity, of coming near enough.

It would be easy to let go, become infatuated with this impossibility, pull the wool over your eyes, weigh you down, you innocent fragile being, crush you; oh, it would be so easy to obsess over you, follow you home, find out your name and email, send you long seductive sentences, too easy, to storm your life, not let you breathe, occupy every free cell of your brain, brainwash you and still you would think it belongs to you; make you feel special, each day declare love to you, making you equipped for leaving. Affection is not selfish, but selfless; the more mature it is, the more selfless it becomes, but not for you, your youth would be your salvation and our demise, everyone gives in accordance to one's potential, even Marx knew that; while your potential for giving is yet to be developed, we would show you with our example how to give. And it's not true that giving is a reward in itself, at least not a reward enough, we need something in return, we need your giving, and there's the catch, you can give only by learning from us giving, and leave us hungry for receiving. For too long. So long...

*You are touching him, stop.*

*Maybe he likes it.*

*Maybe I don't.*

*Touch her.*

*No, I don't like her. If you insist, I'll touch the one over there.*

*Where?*

*The sad, porcelain one with a martini.*

*Okay, see, (both hands in the air), see, I'm not touching the boy.*

Music bombards our bodies with wave upon wave of tremor. Dancers sense each other through these waves, adrift in the sweat of mutual desire, 'Caution' a forbidden word, cannot be heard, nor uttered through the noise, concentric circles of massive want, and no possibility of communication. Get rid of memories, meet oblivion in the broken-up rhythm, recognizing faces of people whom you have known, scores of missed intercourses from the past, those we didn't want at the time, but now rack our brains with how we could have made them happen, illusory conditions appearing real enough to obsesses over, caught in the economy of people caught in circles, no time to form new links, expand what they exist within, letting no one new inside, taking part in what only seemingly invites participation, faces come and go as they please, no obligations and no sense of discovery, emptying oneself of the self to find someone similar in the crowd, looking for sameness, because people are unable to recognize difference, and yet without difference how do they improve, how do they become, how do they define who they are?

*Wanna drink?*

*I'm already drunk.*

Last time they went to a concert was when they had first begun dating. They found a relief of their hunger for each other by escaping into the hunger of the crowd. Now the crowd contains countless selves, each of whom they could easily be, or even more easily be with. So many young people came together tonight to be alone in an exact same way. Exiting a mass to end up in each other was a discovery back then, but now it's as much of a discovery to enter a mass, partake in the multitude and transform it.

*I could get aroused.*

*I know.*

*Can one pet a pack?*

Dozens of touches fall upon shoulders and back, chest and hips, just when it seems that one will register, send an electric impulse up to the brain, it disconnects, is replaced, the body teased, reassembled beyond self-recognition in an awkward shape dictated by the configuration of the crowd, spaces other bodies leave unoccupied for not longer than a fragment of a second, ordering it to be now, or be gone forever. The noise, irreverent and inconsequential, blankets any plan to retain integrity, opens up the pores teasing out invisible threads of the subconscious to tangle them into a jittery, violent weaving. The last possible way to feel uneasy is to refuse to take part in the one.

*Watch me.*

And closes her eyes, lets go of his hand, is heaved away out of his reach by bodies spinning, eddying into a half a dozen half embraces with bodies palsied by the music that presses on their shoulders, suspended in the level of their ears and their minds, struggling like a roped beast, convulsing, twitching, like a body dying, like a netted lion, poisoned, tranquilized, that would drop, if they wouldn't hold it up, like a terracotta cat, break into a thousand pieces, stop, hush up, decease.

*Watch...*

The body doesn't see, doesn't comprehend the limbic alphabet of digits pressing against wet skin, knees brushing against thighs. The mind is clear, closed in a shell of black enamel with a satin spot upon which it sits and observes its many polyvalent reflections. Outside, ribs get counted and recounted, breasts sought for, inspected, hair whipping other parted lips, breath stolen from breath, stored in stomach, right above the fallopian discomfort, a fish disturbed, a dolphin rendered catatonic by a probing, poking, palpating sonar, myriad of touches serving like a skin upon skin, and deeper, under, otherness for epidermis.

*Watch me.*

The very moment that the eyes close to the stimuli producing polity, the experience is homogenized, deformed in the uniform, quality becomes quantity, the work of bodies, of organs, turned into an organic world. Something is wet, something chafed, cut, bruised. The self experiences infinitesimal reduction until it's bare naked, peeled like an onion to its last skin containing -nothing. Nothing -miniscule expanse of space containing nothing at all, not even a memory of something that once might have inhabited it. Nothing -there is nothing inside, body a purse holding no coin, empty, bankrupt. Nothing, apart from the awareness of nothing; nothing, apart from the awareness of the self, self that is no more and, doubtless, never existed, from which in the very next moment, the whole self again expands, opens up like an umbrella, out of nowhere, thin air, like a flower budding from a seed in an instant of a footage that took weeks to film. And you realize: there is no you. Only a person you suspect you might be. And a person suspected by the other.

*You okay?*

*I lost my shoe.*

*What?*

'I lost my shoe, I lost my fucking shoe!'

'Okay, let's get out of here.'

'But what about my shoe.'

'Fuck the shoe. Let's go.'\*

What is one? One is none without the other. This can easily be proven and is hard to argue against. If there is anyone capable of making a case for his or her own singular, individual existence, we would like that person to step forward and explain it to us. But they are not allowed to use words, because words have not been created nor can be employed for the benefit of just one person. This individual would have to argue his or her position with a set of original, never before seen signs, which would at the same time be understandable to the two of us as well. We'd like to see that person extract a few thoughts from his or her head by using a disposable language, where words would be leafs of toilet paper. We'd like to see that person refer to him or herself in terms that are inapplicable to any other person that has ever lived; he or she are not allowed to compare themselves to any other person if their existence is truly singular. We're patient. We'll give anyone time enough to perform such an elaborate pantomime for our behalf.

So why do we exist separate? Why are our bodies different, why are there two sexes, and multiple ways of making use of those bodies and sexes? Why if I am me and the other and the other is me and the other, why are we not the same? Because uniformity is not compatible with survival. Haven't you noticed, soldiers are all dressed the same to (yes) die less, but more so to die less noticeably. Because what would happen if I were only I and the other was I too - there would be only I. So there need to exist both I and the other for me to be able to be me and the other, and the other to be the other and be me, in order for the difference to be recognized, in order for the difference to take me beyond myself and the other beyond the other.

The predominant perception of the problem is: if, indeed, one does not exist without the other, if one exists through one's self but also through the other then what exists is not many but one, each person is then only a cell of a collective organism which could be viewed as the real, physical body of the God. But both in the case of one person capable of separate existence from others, and in the case of the entire humanity serving the purpose of the divine body it comprises, what lacks is the balance, because, in order to continue, existence cannot be limited to the existence of one, but the existence of many; and in order for one to survive, one's existence needs to be connected to the existence of many, and in order for the group to survive, its existence needs to be connected to the existence of an individual. Human beings are vessels of life, it gets poured from one person into the other propelled by the current of time. What life you have can be saved by the other person not by yourself, true immortality is in the continuation, in linking of arms and ideas, a chain of life developed in multiple dimensions, a web, a bee-hive structure, fingerprints of life, an infinitely intricate molecule, chromosomes of the universe. A shortest possible answer to the question of the meaning of life for which a child playing in the sand of the beach on the coast of the ocean of the glimmer of the tear of the planet is the shortest possible acronym -that child is you, that child is your child, that child is a child of your child, is a child of your enemy of your neighbor of your friend of yourself. That child is the other and that other is you. Turn your eyes away from the mirror and look at yourself.

'Listen, Jack...'

'How many times do I have to tell you, old man? I ain't no Jack.'

He can see the glycerin sheen of the black man's back, shoulders tight, flexing, shelved on the screen of the mirror like a severed bronze torso in a museum repository. If he gets on his knee to tie a shoe there are four feet in the mirror, two brown ones sprouting into muscular calves, and two pale, yellowish ones, with gnarly ankles and gristly knees. If he sits on the bench to listen, the black man's behind obstructs his vision.

'I know, Jack... But listen, you know how you always tell me...'. The other voice is tired and plaintive, doesn't even echo between the walls of lockers, comes from below, from someone sitting on a bench on the other side, but sounding even lower, below the normal level of existence.

'And stop looking at me.'

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\* The world is empty, hollow, at its center there is nothing but nothingness, simple sole solitude, from beneath our feet gapes an abysmal drop, icy chasm, pure panic keeping us afloat, on the surface of our fears. The core of the planet is eaten clean by the black mold of mistrust and the black rust of ruthlessness, its barren shell has been filling up with thousands of rainfalls, the water has become foul-smelling and murky enough to spawn life of its own, life other than us. The sun is black, dead, extinguished, immobile. It hangs in the sky like a hood ornament in the eve of collision, adamant, insensible, purely decorative, or it would be if we would be able to see it from where we're standing. Nobody's been able to see it from where they're standing for years. On the thin illusion of a ground, nations of Cains have been marching against nations of Abels foaming at the mouth for the sake of the old tribal rituals and rivalry. This illusion is such that it feels as if we're climbing a mountain summit when in fact we're submerged up to our ears in the ocean of liquid schizophrenia, afraid to touch person next to us, scared to discover half of it is missing, or that it's only an arm, a teeth-severed fist bobbing in the dark water of the world, sharks of our own creation driving us like sheep dogs. In a night as black as this one, it's hard to orientate, air is bitter and hot like tea, every breath is more of a gulp, more of a forced sip, we might as well be drowning head first for all we know. In a world such as this one, to connect is to become heavier, to be heavier is to sink more easily, each person another person's bane, a friend a dead weight, a darling one a millstone hanging around our neck.

The black man wipes himself hurriedly, switching the balled-up towel between his hands. The eyes that don't reach the mirror misinterpret his words as an invitation.

'Don't you be looking at me.'

The invitation seems hard to resist.

'Okay, what the fuck is wrong with you?'

It sounds as if there is almost an attempt to answer the question.

'You want this? You want this?'

The black man exhibits something in his hand.

'You want this in your mouth?'

He cannot hear a reply.

'Come over here.'

A pair of bony shoulders aligns with the black man's knees; arms stretch to press against the locker for balance, tin creaks denting. Skin slides across the wood of the bench. Shoulders extend. Lips smack against flesh. Spittle bubbles. A palm drums against the tin as the mouth chokes, a hand white and withered creeps prehensile like an ivy branch up the black man's thigh, where its caught, ripped off the glistening skin, bent aside, obstructing vine, held aside, until the black man's buttocks shudder, contort, and there's a gasp, and a sigh, and a gurgle.

'There, now fuck off and be crazy someplace else.'

'Thank you, Jack.'

Locker door bangs, trouser legs are stuffed, zipper zipped up. A shirt, a sneaker, a water bottle is dropped into a bag hastily. Locker door bangs again and is slammed shut.

'Could I have your energy bar, Jack?'

'Why do we stay together?'

'Because everybody needs to be with someone, and I am someone and you are someone.'

'Why do we stay with that same someone? Someone can be anyone you see, someone can be someone else than me, someone other, someone different than someone you are with at any given moment. All those people we see, I see you watching the women, I see them watching you, you see me watch men who watch me.'

'What would be the point of not being with you only to be with someone else?'

'But what about all those other people we are not with while we're with each other?'

'But we were never with them in the first place.'

'But you were with someone else before you were with me?'

'Only for a day. You were with other men.'

'That was different. Even if only for a day, why didn't you stay with her?'

'She didn't want to stay with me. It's not different, it's the same.'

'But what if she had stayed. I never wanted to be with any of them, I was testing them.'

'She wouldn't have stayed. She was testing me. And you were testing yourself. I was testing myself. You need to know what you don't want, same as you need to know what to look for.'

'So it's all predetermined.'

'Nothing is predetermined. You and I determine things. You and I decided to be together. It was a decision we made, not fate, not God, you and I are what makes you and I who we are.'

'But you'd still like to fuck some of those loud women, some of those noisy women, other women, different than me.'

'No I wouldn't.'

'Yes you would, I can see it in your face, you can't hide anything from me.'

'No I wouldn't, and I don't have anything to hide, all I do is play, play with the images, create illusions, play with the illusions, that's what I do, that's what we do.'

'But if I'd tell you it's okay to do it.'

'I still wouldn't do it.'

'Why?'

'Because I wouldn't tell you it's okay to do the same.'

'You're a coward.'

'Yes I am.'

'And what if I wouldn't want to be with a coward?'

'Then you wouldn't be with me in the first place.'

'But what if I changed my mind, what if I decided that it now bothers me that you're such a coward?'

'But you already decided to be with me.'

‘And what if I were to decide not to be with you anymore?’

‘We wouldn’t be having this conversation.’

‘And?’

The phone is back in its cradle, and for a moment I consider you don’t have a right to know because you didn’t volunteer to make the call. What’s more, you compromised the idea by voicing your reluctance, dropping the seed of doubt in the soil I’ve burrowed, by not being prepared to participate in that instance of perfect enthusiasm which lasted from the moment I noticed the For Rent sign in the window of the upstairs apartment, till the moment I confronted the calculated telephone tone of our landlord.

‘He says he’s already got someone.’

I watch your face for a sign of relief, hope for a sign of discontent, but discover neither, discover my own annoyance with your complaisance, discover you’re an accomplice in the plot meant to keep me, keep us, from a two-bedroom apartment on the upper floor, keep us from windows that don’t stare at the blank brickwork of the adjacent building, keep us from two windows in each room that claim the sun for at least two hours a day, and overlook the treetops, and overlook the edge of the city.

‘He’s lying. He doesn’t want us there because he’d have a hard time renting this place. He’d have to paint the walls, and wash the carpet, and get a new fridge and stove before he could find anyone to live here.’

We need more sun in our life, sun makes people optimistic. I see your sallow face, wrinkles deeper than they should be. Places make you older. This place makes us older, the city keeping us hostage. A new apartment would be a positive change. We cannot simply run away, not just yet. Later maybe. But we could afford more windows open to new views, bigger slices of the sky, bright eyes through which to watch the red cobbled street, with students hauling dirty laundry to the laundromat and obese people driving to meet their meals.

We stay in one place for a while and depression starts to show up in an all too familiar shape, a genie that doesn’t even bother to dress up for us, a sloppy demon, appearing in regular intervals. Soon, whenever I’m in a good mood, I start thinking How long do I have till the bad mood comes? It doesn’t make much sense. Brittle leaves of a dying summer, nothing makes much sense. To move into a new apartment would be an act of bear-like behavior, finding a cave to spend the winter in. The apartment upstairs is a trap for the sun; if there’s even one ray of it this winter it’ll catch it. The kisses I’ve never given would come back to me while it would snow outside. But for someone else. Not for us.

He was lying, there’s no one, not yet at least, the whole world is lying, is an obstacle, is a bore, a sulfur-belching tar pit. It would be nice to live in the world that doesn’t get stuck the very moment you step into it. It would be nice to find a place that doesn’t resent being left and returned to frequently, a place that would change of its own accord and make us change, rather than make us stay the same, make us stay who we no longer wish to be. It would be so nice to lie under a tree and listen to bees buzzing, it would be nice if it would be spring, but it’s never spring, it always melts away before we have even become aware of it. Who knows what someone is doing in Santiago right now, reading papers and sipping espresso. Funny how people in other places, places we are not in, always have so much free time on their hands, have nothing better to do but enjoy their life.

My head hurts. It’s these narrow walls and artificial light, making us sick, consumptive, paralytic, rheumatic, asthmatic, this damp dirty dusty neighborhood where people pay dearly to live cheap. On any afternoon, instead of playing in the garden, one simply stays in bed and spends the rest of one’s days observing the bean stalks overgrowing the window. We are defective because no one comes around to visit and we visit nobody. It’s strange, it’s liberating, it’s predictable. We enjoy the security of isolation. Maybe it would be good to vomit on regular basis; in Prague they have cold houses, rooms with high empty ceilings, a naked piano in the corner, black mold instead of silvery cobwebs. Our lungs are filled with the asbestos of paranoia and guilt. Who cares if tomorrow will bring relief? And relief from what?

We walk around our neighborhood, walk hard as if we’re being paid to do it, walk so hard, for long stretches of time so that we meet almost everybody twice. The fat man with his small dog, the Siamese cat that commutes between its house and the café across the street where it has its own bench on which it sits not minding the patrons who are mostly college students with unnatural penchant for chess.

We pass by many people jogging on our walks. Today we twice passed by a tall thin blonde girl who was more power-walking than jogging and she smiled at us. Both times it was a smile of recognition, a warm, friendly smile, of the kind that people usually don’t offer to strangers at random. The first smile she gave us when we first had passed her had been strange enough, it made me want to hold that girl, be her friend; I could picture us, the three of us, in our bed, in our apartment. I think the two of us would know what to do with a girl as beautiful as she; unlike most people, we know how to be happy. I read from her smile that hers was a kind of beauty you couldn’t be jealous of, because it’s a kind of

beauty people share, the kind of beauty you and I share, the kind of beauty she had recognized in us as the kind of beauty she herself shares.

But you haven't noticed her, we were talking, the way we usually do on our walks, one of us explaining a particular position or point, the other minding the sidewalk for cracks in the concrete, low branches and things to see, interesting enough to interrupt the one who is speaking.

I was confused, the way I get with strange people, usually it's you who's doing all the greeting for both of us, and I had managed to say nothing. A Hello would have been good, but I'm not good at starting conversations, and as she passed with her smile aimed at us, beaming at us like a pocket-size sun, I regretted immediately my not saying anything.

She could have been our friend. We don't have many friends. I wonder, why is that? It might be because we expect too much of people. But we expect too much of ourselves as well, so it would be disrespectful to expect anything less from others.

I had forgotten all about the girl by the time we got close to our home. That is to say that I hadn't forgotten about her at all but had decided to think about her later, talk to you about her, maybe write about her. I had my eye on a swarm of fireflies passing light on the front lawn of the house in which the fat man lives with the small dog. You were talking about how all things connect and if I were to look at it that way there's nothing random. I saw a girl coming toward us in a white T-shirt and blue shorts, and I hoped it would be our girl because it was nothing out of the ordinary to see the same person twice in one walk, not for us. I had hoped, but at that time it was already getting dark, I couldn't be sure, but when she was right next to us I realized it was her. She smiled at us, this time the smile was even bigger and brighter, she was glad to see us again, but I was already preparing myself to find out that it wasn't her, and had prepared myself to say nothing when what I wanted was to grab her by the hand, stop her, ask her why is she smiling, why is she so happy to see us, could it be that she understands the language we were talking in, could she have understood what we were talking about, that there are no random events, no random acts, that there is a special kind of beauty shared by certain people, beauty that grows when people who share it love each other, I wanted to invite her to our clean bed, so that she can explain what was it about us that she recognized.

But she had passed smiling, we passed, you not even noticing her because it had been my turn again to mind the pavement and keep an eye out for dangerous and interesting things (poor job I was making of it, I admit). We had passed, fireflies still passing light on the fat man's lawn, and immediately I had thought I'll tell you all about her, I'll write about her and, maybe, we'll meet her again tomorrow. I'll make sure we go out at the same time we went out today, we're sure to meet her, unless I have dreamed her up. We'll both have an eye out for her, when we see her we'll stop her, you'll stop her and you'll talk to her, you'll start up a conversation. I'll tell you what to ask her, it doesn't matter if she doesn't end up in our bed, I know, we are like children, we bring home things we find in the street. We might bring her home or not, but she could be our friend because this person that you and I are, sometimes it feels as if that person is lonely, but it's not, it's just that this person is something we made, something we're proud of, an invention we want to test on real people, we want someone to listen to us, we want to listen in to someone listening to us, want to watch someone watching us, want to talk to someone talking to us, enter someone entering us, see if this person that you and I are is someone someone else can fall for, because if it is, that means that that person that you and I are is alive.\*

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\* Try to count the moments and you'll discover that time is of no essence; threads of yesterday, tomorrow, and today are knotted in your mind which is the ultimate time traveling machine. It sifts through the memories, feelings, premonitions, filters them out, it is a gold digger's tin pan lying in the shallows of the rushing water of the river of time.

We don't want total awareness. Total awareness would result in every instant being worth too much and nothing at all, priceless and worthless, more than anything and nothing at all. Life would slow down, become stagnant; if everything would contain perfect meaning, nothing would have any meaning anymore. Because meaning exists if some of it is to be found in every thing, a grain of wisdom is truly wisdom only because it leads to another grain of wisdom, and wise are not those who gather them in vials of glass to admire them under the right light, but those who continue to move from one moment of enlightenment to another. True progress is made only in tracing footprints one has not had a chance to leave yet. Total awareness is not progress. It is ignorance that moves us forward, with curiosity as the string that makes the puppet of ignorance move.

Time is nothing. There is no chronological order in life, no chronological order to pain, or fear, or affection. If you really feel for someone, you always feel for someone as if you've always known and always felt for him.

'Or her.'

Or her.

And then there is no me and you. We talk and our words intermingle, I eat your words, store them in my pockets and my heart, rob you of the words you robbed me of. We complicate things by insisting we are one, but if need be we are many, we look to all corners of the earth, and the sky is but a retina of our eye by which we stare at the universe as if it were the first drop of dew.

'I talk to you.'

'And I talk to you.'

The dialogue brings us into one. Communication connects, words, thoughts, ideas exchanged are never lost but are multiplied by the number of persons you share them with.

'We are selfish.'

But by giving the true meaning of the principle of communication to the world we are buying our freedom to be as alone and egotistic as we want to be. There's nothing wrong with having an ego if it's not attached to something one values above everything else. In our case we are ridesharing, we're not wasteful, we're making the best possible use that two people can make out of one ego. Our ego is detached, it travels freely, it is like a benign

Once, one morning, his father found a dead cat stretched on the front lawn of their house. It was gray, had been well fed, had chafe marks of a collar around its neck, fur worn out, not as long or as groomed as on the rest of it, marks of age, marks of being owned by a caring master or mistress. What does it matter, death comes for us all, and for the cat his father had found death drove, skid marks visible on the asphalt of the street they lived in, death kind enough to lay the cat down on the green, neatly cut grass, grass his father had mowed, and didn't stand for anyone else mowing it, even when he was sick, and it was raining, death kind to a cat, not minding very much about the people living in the house on whose lawn the death had laid it, not caring enough for the living, caring for them far less than for the elegant, noble, gracious, lordly cat it had come, it had drove for to run down, because, don't you see, death has no interest in the living, it is the caretaker of the dead, cats and other beings. But his father didn't know that, or didn't care, and had stayed home in his pajamas, didn't go to work, didn't say, didn't eat, didn't do anything except peek through the curtains at the front lawn every hour or so, mumbling to his pale chest bare under his sickly silky pajamas, for more than a week, until he, the boy, the son, snuck out to the front lawn one midnight with a bundle of old newspapers one midnight, and in the morning it was as if everything had never happened almost.

On the outside every person's life appears simple and undemanding. One could live any of them without even half trying. Sitting at the airport terminal, fighting off sleep for fear of our bags being stolen, or tempered with, contaminated with other people's malice or misery, I look at them and choose, how easy it would be to be any of them, much easier than it is being me. Not that being me is all that demanding, but I would be more comfortable making more mistakes more often if I was to live someone else's life, if I was to hold that airhead girl's cell phone and talk to her non-existing friend with girl trouble on the other end of the line.

We're leaving. This is what it will be like when we decide to leave. The tickets were cheap, they'll take us to a place not far enough, a place we don't really want to go to, and our bags are filled with random things just so that we can feel their weight. One of them contains a dictionary and a gym towel, the other a pair of Wellingtons and a flashlight. But this is what it'll be like when we really leave. We just want to make sure that we still know how, once we decide to go. We just want to make sure that we know how to board a plane in a hurry, and how to decide to leave, all of a sudden, on a spur of a moment. This is a rehearsal.

The buses never seem to go anywhere important. They simply leave their depots, drive around the block of dilapidated buildings to instill in the passengers the fear of failure, the fear of the wrath of god of poverty, then return breathing heavily those dark diesel fumes, with their bloodshot soot-covered windows offering a view of a no particular grey day of gangrenous angular edifices erect, not the least talkative, monuments of momentariness, here today, gone tomorrow, here today. The buses, filled with sorry, sad not so well-to-dos, well-not-to-dos, have-nots and what-nots, their pale faces painted onto window panes, hardly decorative weight of existence, weighing down on the eyes that observe them, those better left unseen patches of life, pride shredded to noodles of complaisance, people condemned to their own company and guidance, day to day, blind leading the blind, crooked leading on the corrupt, deformed and defaced, demented and deranged, angry and hungry... Of what if not of life? The other side. The greener grass. If *repetitio est magistra studiorum*, and *historia est magistra vitae*, is study the master or the mistress of life, or vice versa, or both, or neither, or none of the above, or not even the none of the above, or not only none of the above but nothing at all, or not even that, not nothing or anything, everything else including, everything, everything else, both everything and everything else, and then some? Yes.

'Is she really worth the trouble?' The girl crosses her eyes to catch a flake of violet nail polish peeling off her ring finger holding the phone. 'I mean, how great is she?'

The waiting area serving some twenty gates smells like a bus of miserable people sitting knee to knee, thigh to thigh, shoulder to shoulder, sweating underneath their damp coats, faces frozen, not enough elbow room to rest chin nor cheek on fist, reading lights off, hypnotized by fear of speed by which the lights pass them by, the streets pass by, the world revolves, the world unfolds, like gauze, a bandage, swaddling clothes of death. All they can do is breathe, and cough, sniff, snort, smack their lips, suck their teeth, click their tongues, whistle, blow, puff, gurgle, filter their spit between their teeth, close their eyes tight from time to time to provoke that soft popping sound that the air makes when caught under their eyelids, in their sinuses, a long, long drive, around the block in eighty days that seem like a life time.

No train that could take us anywhere stops in this town. We know. We asked around. The only train that could take us to a place from where we could get somewhere stops at three in the morning to pick up yesterday's papers and tomorrow's old news. First couple of times we tried to get a cab to take us to the train station, but we overslept every

time, until the cab company refused to send any more cars around. Staying awake proved to be the biggest problem. We'd even camp out at the train station only to wake up when the rush hour would bring the people who'd push us off our bench. We realized that if we were the type of people who could stay awake to catch the three o'clock train we'd either leave the town before we'd very much want to leave it, or we wouldn't even want to leave the town and would get up in time to catch the train only to realize we don't want to catch it.

'I'm flying from Buffalo to Columbus through Washington D.C.' Wiggling her toes the girl slaps her sandal against her heel playfully. A crack of the whip. Blue eyes scan the crowd for signs of someone listening in. Luckily the invisible strap-on phone booth she's wearing keeps her safe, interested in appearing disinterested. 'Well, go figure, with all the layovers I could have driven in less time.'

We've considered driving. Still remember the time we drove here. Mind raw from it like fresh road kill. Glistens in the early light of a dawn of a day that is going to be like the day before, like the day before was like the tomorrow, today, the same. I don't fear anything except that which I might forget.

'Tomorrow I'm back in Buffalo.'

Myself I could forget easily, like my card's PIN number after four days of road and paying cash for fear of places we drove through being too far from civilization and the possibility of banks having eager low-maintenance robots trained in ferreting out sudden changes in customers' spending habits, like odd restaurant patterns, or unorthodox travel routes, suspecting foul play, suspecting someone other than me had rid me of my credit card and was engaged in unauthorized use of the same, canceling my card, leaving us stranded, in the middle of nowhere, or thereabouts, with no means of repeating the day.

'Friday I'm flying to San Francisco.'

Traveling is the only way of developing a routine of experiencing the new. Other than being in a relationship. Or writing. But almost anyone can travel, if forced to. Almost anyone can learn, if forced to. We look around us, they're calling first passengers. We see hundreds of people traveling for no apparent reason, against their wishes, against their better judgment even, out of pure need to be somewhere where they not yet are, traveling as a time-controlling activity, time-catching, like that time we went to that pancake place simply because we wanted to, simply because we had no other place to be at, knowing what the food would be like but not minding it. The sun stayed outside, like a good boy, a golden retriever tied to a lamppost. Something had ended that day, finally, nothing else was yet to begin, we had time, time on our hands, time on our bare arms, time-stained faces, strawberry jam and time dripping down our chins, from the corners of our mouths, too sweet to be eaten, so we spread it on our skin like a balm, a tan tonic, glue, to fix the moment in our minds, to attract like flypaper the flies of time, have them stick to us, caught, in the crack, the opening, the fissure of time, broken, chipped window of time sparing a glimpse of what eternity would be like, rivers of strawberry jam, pylons of stacked pancakes supporting roofs of pagan temples, sun sticking to the scene like a warm, sweaty palm you don't want to let go, sun-speckled skin, bronze, comfortable tan of the mind, our California eternity, the one we never hoped we'd cry for.

'Let's get out of here.'

We cash in our tickets just in time. For some other time.