

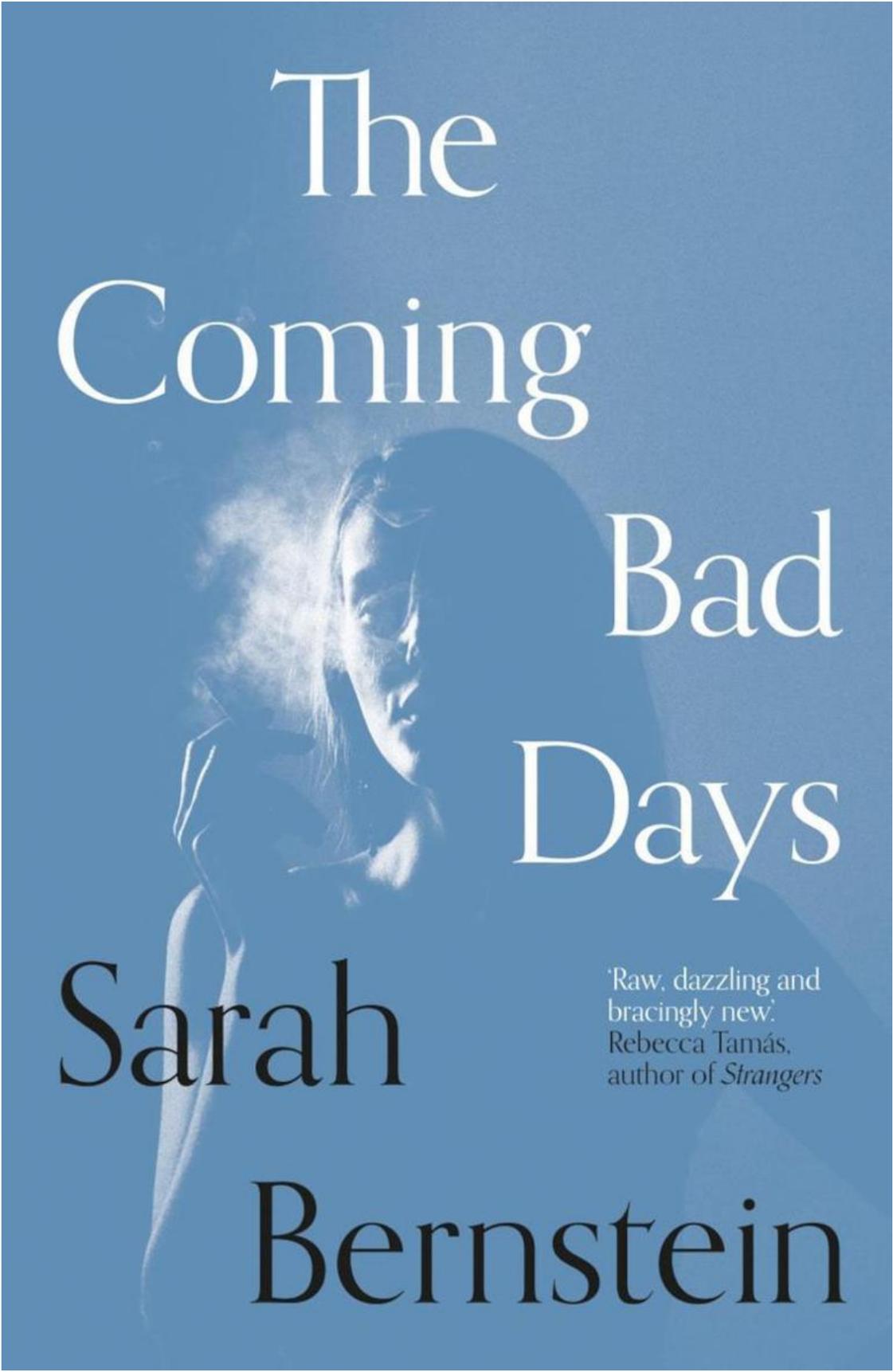
The
Coming

Bad
Days

Sarah

'Raw, dazzling and
bracingly new.'
Rebecca Tamás,
author of *Strangers*

Bernstein

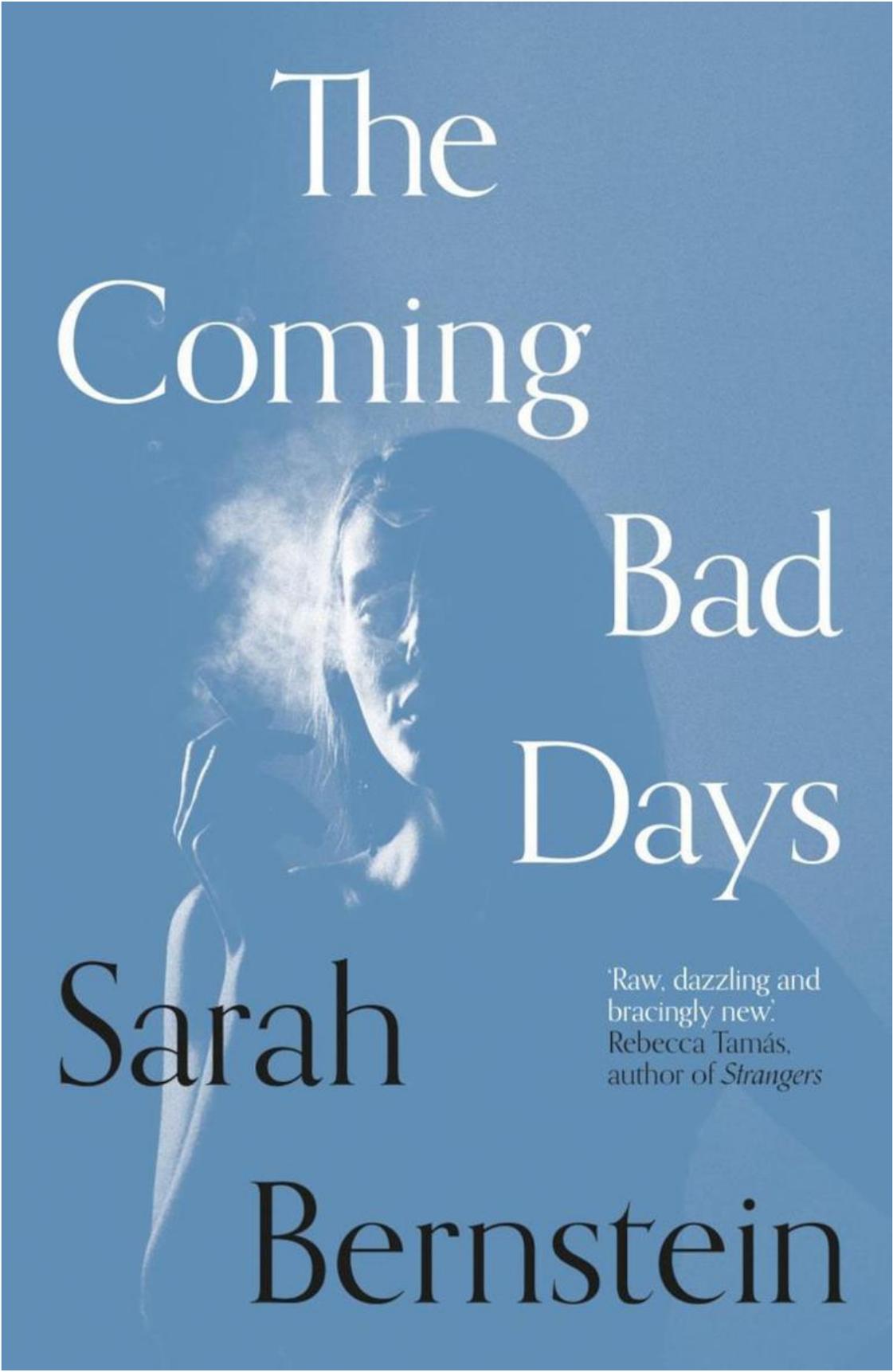


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‘The Coming Bad Days is raw, dazzling and bracingly new. A vividly original novel about the fractured difficulty of living.’ – Rebecca Tamás, author of Strangers

‘Sinewy and seductive. A beautiful, mysterious, existential shudder of a book, and a map of disorientation.’ – Olivia Sudjic, author of Asylum Road

‘The Coming Bad Days is lucid, funny and darkly alive; a bright knife that refuses to cut out the worm in the heart.’ – Daisy Lafarge, author of Life Without Air

‘An exceptionally sharp, poised novel about the fragility and strangeness of existence. By turns mournful, wry and starkly beautiful, this is a book to savour.’ – Megan Hunter, author of The Harpy

The
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Bad
Days

Sarah

Bernstein



This blue & windy book is for Tricia, for Hilary

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I left the man with whom I had been living one morning in late summer after opening the wardrobe and seeing the tidy line of his shirt collars, white and blue, white and blue. I felt sick. I began to see my life rolling out in front of me and it looked like the street on which we then lived, with the blue and green and white houses and the red and yellow doors. And I could discern in the distance the seasons rolling in, and the apples falling in the orchard, and the windows freezing shut, and the blue smell of spring, and the children in the wading pool in the baked summer light. And I knew that underneath it all were these hard and secret things. Prior to this moment, which proved in fact to be a decisive one in the course of my life, I had been afraid of being alone. The notion that I was free in theory but also in practice to do whatever I liked with my life was terrifying; it was nothing short of a nightmare. I moved to a low stone cottage on a street of low stone cottages. Soon it was autumn and the windows looked out onto the night, which fell promptly at half past four in the afternoon. All around me was quiet. During the day I sat at my desk and felt the light drain from the bedroom as the sun moved out of the eastern sky. I watched the trees submit to the passing of the seasons. Various birds came and went. Occasionally I ventured into the garden to collect leaves into a brown bin assigned to the address by the council, or else to cut back the ivy that grew around the garden's perimeter. During these several months of making unsuccessful job applications from my desk, which was wide and beautiful, oak, I began to travel by train to the city nearby with some frequency. At first I had a fear of taking the train by myself. I had read a story about a girl who got on a train one night and was found dead weeks later in a forest far away. The local news affiliates circulated an image of this girl taken from CCTV footage. In the still she was standing on the railway plat-form wearing an expression that seemed to me familiar. In short the story about this girl confirmed what I had long suspected, namely that journeys of this kind, taken alone, taken by women, end in self-annihilation.

I began to appreciate being amongst things that were mine only. I cleaned with a puritanical zeal. I found a rug beater and dragged the living room rug into the garden. I scrubbed the floorboards on my hands and knees. I scoured away all evidence of the cottage's past inhabitants, any hint that lives had been lived in the place before mine. Each morning I rose early and walked up a hill. From there I could see the sea, the city and more hills rising gently out of the land. I stood on this hill in the fog, in the sun, in the early morning rain, often in the cloud and more rarely in the snow, and felt triumphant. The vital thing, the absolutely most vital thing, is not to let anybody get to the bottom of you.

I had around that time been awarded my PhD for a thesis on poetry in the Maghreb, literature about which I cared deeply, and at once found myself in the position of having to apply for jobs. My research was met with contempt from administrators and hiring panels alike, who customarily rejected my applications outright, although, and this was less common, I was now and then required to submit to routinely humiliating interviews. My professional, not to mention personal, failures at this time were so complete that to this day I wonder whether I would not have been better off taking my own life. In the end I was too cowardly to carry out even this pitiful act of self-assertion, though I had the means close to hand. I arrived at last at the point at which the heroine should pull herself up by the so to speak bootstraps and succeed against all odds and on her own terms. Instead, after several weeks of drinking quantities of gin in my pyjamas, I elected to give in to the exigencies of the world as it was. Having never read Celan, I chose a new research topic – Speech and Silence: Paul Celan and the Transcendental – more or less at random. The department that finally took me on, defined under such broad areas of categorisation as English and Comparative Literatures, was chaired by a man whose research profile comprised only the words The Rhetoric of John Donne. I felt I understood the requirements of the post. I eschewed all personal relationships except insofar as they dealt expediently and discreetly with specific physical yearnings. I never invited colleagues to my home that in any case was outside of the city, and I did not fraternise with students outside of the cold seminar rooms except during my office hours, from which they often left crying. As a result of this, my work, which had yet to generate any material output, and indeed was unlikely ever to do so, was considered serious if somewhat obscure, and I was left to my own devices.

The presiding instincts of the university department that engaged me were those of tribalism and aggression. Colleagues disappeared with a regularity I found at first alarming but to which in fact I acclimatised quite rapidly. The sustained and targeted campaigns of harassment affected some more than others, to be sure, their objectives were barely concealed, and yet I knew implicitly that recovering any evidence as to precisely what had happened would have been impossible. Besides, up until then my presence had barely registered, and I had no interest in sticking my head above the proverbial parapet. I sat in my office reading Celan, and at lunchtime ate a cheese sandwich standing by the window, watching my female colleagues furtively cross the quadrangle. At least once a week I witnessed one being waylaid by undergraduates and carried off into a doorway. I knew most of these women by sight, having encountered them either at the monthly staff meetings or else at the department's weekly seminars, both of which, the latter in particular, were exercises in barbarism. Each Wednesday lunchtime the elected member of staff would stand in front of a podium and lecture for an hour upon a subject of his or her choosing, at intervals reaching out a trembling hand for a sip of water. At the end of this hour, my colleagues took turns decimating the speaker, undermining his or her argument and by extension his or her life's work or else and indeed just as often casting aspersions on his or her personal life. After this we held a wine reception. I felt I fitted in quite well, but one day, arriving at my office, I found a note tucked under the door.

Sometimes this genius goes dark and sinks down into the bitter well of his heart.

When Celan jumped to his death on an April day in Paris – incidentally, and perhaps by no small coincidence, my own birthday – he left a biography of Hölderlin lying open on his desk with these words underlined. I had given no reason for anyone to think I was possessed of genius. I had arrived in the post via the careful cultivation of an aura of tedious scholarliness in fact modelled upon a man I once loved and who had treated me as a perennial distraction from his important intellectual work. My most recent involvement, in reality the only person with whom I had been involved since I left the man with the blue and white shirts, ended our relationship via email five days before Christmas, citing as a reason his sadness, which was the result of a series of personal traumas dating back to his childhood, the memories of which he had not, he admitted, altogether recovered. My failure to respond generated a series of further missives that continue to this day in which he outlined, amongst other things, his new lovers' outlook on his cock, which, he wrote, I might recollect curved inwards at an angle of approximately forty degrees. What can I say. A man wants a cipher.

At night I lay awake listening to the police helicopters that had been despatched in great numbers following the disappearance of two girls. The searches brought up nothing in spite of the increased presence of these vehicles, whose spotlights roved through the dark streets and even occasionally came through windows, patches alighting briefly upon a desk, say, or on a person looking out at the night. By day I sat in my office, filling notebooks with quotations that had no discernible relationship to one another except a pleasing sound. I had difficulty organising my ideas, which I could only catch in a peripheral way. I felt vacuous and degenerate and, when confronted with contact with other people, utterly contentless. I thought more often of the note slipped under my door and watched my colleagues closely at the Wednesday seminars. I wondered whether any of these people had the wherewithal to write out the words in blue ink, to fold the slip of paper and clandestinely to slide it underneath my office door. It seemed beyond them, beyond these mostly enervated people to carry out such an act. I struggled even to imagine, for instance, the Emerson scholar tying his rubbish in a bag and carrying it out to the bin, an activity he must have performed at least once in his life, but which seemed at the same time unlikely to the point of impossibility. And this man, this relatively young scholar of Emerson, was by far the most physically mobile person within the department, so that, if I found it difficult to imagine him writing out a note in blue ink, bending down, and sliding it beneath the office door of a person who was, when one came to it, little more than a stranger, it stretched credulity to a breaking point to even consider the possibility that any one of the other members of the department could have undertaken this same series of actions. At the seminars we stood in knots discussing, more often than not, the deteriorating weather, for instance the early falling darkness or the steadily falling snow, or in warmer seasons, the lashing rain or the debilitating heat, all of which, for various reasons, impeded the work of the department, either as a result of the roads being blocked due to ice or to flooding, causing delays or cancellations to classes and meetings, or else because of the daylight, of which there was too much or not enough. We did not discuss the girls' disappearance, nor the search helicopters, whether because my colleagues were somehow unaware of the goings-on in the city or had decided for some reason that remained unclear to me not to discuss

the matter, I was uncertain. As the autumn term wore on, conversation centred more and more on the lengthening nights, which had roused the department to a state of dejection in which they exulted. At the same time, and owing to the unspoken but nevertheless concerted effort by certain agents to cull scholars deemed to be difficult, and to do so, you understand, in a way that would not open them up to legal action of any kind, there were very few women on campus by the time the term ended. It was a fact which went unremarked upon but which was significant in that male members of staff found themselves sitting, astonished, on exam boards, awash in paperwork. One does, I observed, after all and on occasion find oneself at the mercy of the impediments we ourselves have laid down for others.

During those autumn months, my next-door neighbour – who, as a result of his leaving certain items of clothing hanging on the line for several weeks, together with the fact of his walkway being strewn with empty crisp packets, fried chicken containers and flyers advertising takeaways and wellness cafes, brought in, presumably, on the wind (for the city in which we lived was very windy) or alternatively by stray animals, I had for some time suspected of having committed suicide – resurfaced. Each night after his return, as I lay in bed trying to fall asleep, feeling a mute horror, or sometimes a certain tightening of the chest that indicates the incipience of a panic attack, I listened – for the head of my bed was pushed up against the wall we shared – to the neighbour’s nocturnal activities. At this stage, his interests seemed primarily to be concerned with home improvement, since I could hear, and indeed had heard, unmistakably, the high whine of a circular saw on the other side of the wall. At times he seemed to be engaged in drilling quantities of holes; at others to be sanding vast slabs of wood. He had, it appeared, a veritable arsenal of power tools at his disposal, which he deployed nightly in the service of some important and secret project. Weeks passed in this manner, and the power tools and the mysterious uses to which they were put, like the search helicopters before them, became a familiar, even integral, part of my night-time routine. I meditated on these mechanical noises, wondering what effect their infiltration into my sleeping mind might have. I had become interested in the idea of rationalising the body, and so I looked hopefully for indications that my psyche was taking on aspects of the machine. I wanted something beyond and far away from the brute fact of the body and the sympathy and repulsion it evoked in turn. I wanted a state of grace. I began, for instance, to have all of my pubic hair waxed off by a woman called Charlotte. By day, Charlotte waxed women’s labia – my own included – and by night, Charlotte stood on the cantilever bridge that stretched over the bay and took photographs of passing cars. She had difficulty understanding what people took from personal relationships, she explained one afternoon as she applied warm wax to my inner thighs. She was more interested in strangers, in the idea of other people. For instance, she said, when people drive in cars late at night, they are, more often than not, driving in their cars alone. Often they are tired, going home from somewhere else, or leaving their homes later than expected to meet

some person in need of assistance. In these moments, she continued, their faces seem in a state of suspension – not quite expressionless, no, but with an aspect of hanging there, behind the windscreen, in the space of the car, the windows up or down, the air freshened or unrefreshed, in silence or with music playing. I feel more connected to, more familiar with these people, Charlotte explained, than I do with my own family, many members of which I see on a daily basis. I met Charlotte every five weeks, in a small room at the back of a hair salon near the park. I was interested primarily in the pursuit of a perfect smoothness, a smoothness that was the after-effect of pain and also of a stranger's impersonal intimacy with my body. A smoothness on whose affordances I would skim the surface of the world, no longer mired in the flesh but pure intellect, high and radiant. And so, as I lay in bed at night, listening either to the neighbour's exertions or else to the helicopters, and sometimes to both at once, I attempted to will my body into a state of pure instrumentality. One night, after the weather had turned, the moon hanging cold in the sky like the blade of a knife, I woke up from a dream about a moth extinguishing itself on a windowsill somewhere in Sussex. Through the wall I could hear the neighbour sobbing. Low, and then louder, a raw, animal sound. Why, I heard the neighbour say through his sobs. I listened to him as he went on in this way for some time. Yes, I thought, as I wiggled my toes under the duvet, each of us has in our mouths the incomparable taste of our own lives. We roll it around with our tongues, over and under, above and below. We hold it in or else we spit it out. And sometimes, sometimes we choke on it.

The thirteenth floor, on which my office was located, happened to be the top floor of the building. From my office window, I could see the hill that stood near to my cottage, and to the left of it, beyond the rows and rows of houses, the bay, and beyond the bay, the sea. The window faced east so that it would catch the morning sun, on those unlikely occasions the sun happened to show itself. The building had been decommissioned several years earlier as part of a plan for its restoration but had subsequently to be put back into use after the university converted a number of the teaching spaces on the main campus, in buildings that looked especially picturesque in the autumn, standing as they did amongst a variety of maple trees, of elm trees, of oak and ash, and even a solitary willow, into administrative offices. Finding themselves with a shortage of space in which to enact what seemed to some the primary functions of the university, the central administrators were forced to allocate some rooms in the formerly decommissioned building to teaching and research, on, I was given to understand, a temporary basis. There were two offices on the thirteenth floor: mine, whose window faced east, and that of another new hire, whose window faced west. The other rooms along the corridor were either completely empty or filled from floor to ceiling with upturned tables and chairs. A few extant blackboards hung here and there on the walls. In the corridor on the opposite wing of the building, which is to say the north wing, which one reached by traversing a series of fire doors, passing by the lifts and going through a further series of fire doors, was a kitchen, unfurnished apart from a small refrigerator and a kettle. On my first day in the building, the other new hire had pushed open the door to my office and within moments, and without having exchanged a word, I found myself carrying one end of a previously upturned desk through the series of fire doors, past the lifts, beyond the further series of fire doors and into the kitchen. The new hire and I also carried in some chairs. He communicated largely via hand gestures and winced when I spoke aloud, but the silence did not seem overtly hostile, in fact I might even have described it as companionable. I thought about pinning things to the corkboards hanging on the walls of my office or placing personal items on my desk but was discouraged by the likelihood of having to move these effects to another space at short notice. Besides, I had no idea of what these things might be. I could see that the

walls of the other new hire's office were also bare, which made me wonder to what extent the decision was informed by the contingent conditions in which we worked, or whether it could be attributed to some more personal and shared quality. Sometimes I looked into his room as I passed by on my way in or out, he seemed always to be there, but soon he began to shut the door while he worked, and after a while covered the narrow glass pane running the length of the door with newspaper. I liked the space of my office. I liked especially to observe the way the sea changed colour from moment to moment, as the day broke or died, as the fog rose or fell, as the rain came down or paused, for a moment, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

As part of a programme of staff well-being recently implemented by the university's administration, all employees were required to participate in collective exercise classes led by professionals at various locations on campus. A sign-up sheet was circulated, attendance would be monitored. I did not under any circumstances wish to witness my colleagues attempt anything called fluid movement, nor to partake in a team sport, I did not want to touch anybody, but the programme demanded engagement in some kind of group activity, and so I embarked upon a course of tai chi. The instructor was a small, elderly white man who rarely spoke aloud and held his sessions in the university's chaplaincy rooms, although at times he would lead us outside, my colleagues and I following in single file, in our sweatpants, in silence, finally arriving at a nearby park. There were few of us in the class, team sports having proved remarkably popular for a group of basically atomised and even adversarial individuals, and those of us who were present were uncoordinated in the main, stiff in the joints and decidedly pedestrian in our spiritual attainments. Our instructor did not seem to mind, merely undertook his private series of movements for approximately one hour at a time, and we followed as best we could. According to the communications that had been issued regarding this programme of action and that stipulated our participation in the same, employees of the university were to pursue a holistic approach to wellness by attending to and accessing our minds, bodies and spirits. The last of these elements was penetrated via the presence of an occasional gang of dogs who would appear in the atrium of our building and whose handlers would encourage passers-by, in cajoling tones, to caress the creatures. As a body, the staff put up little resistance to this scheme of enforced health. In any case it transpired that we had signed away certain rights in our contracts; from a legal standpoint any pushback would be construed as a breach of employment conditions, we did not have a leg to stand on. The performance of physical wellness did not concern me; beyond the mild indignity of appearing in a sweatsuit before my colleagues, it did not require very much effort on my part. I was much less sanguine, however, about the institution's attempted incursions into my psychic life and the applications to which any testimony might be put. This became relevant once the administration published a further edict requiring staff to submit to

a series of psychiatric sessions with a doctor appointed by the institution. I understood analysis from a theoretical standpoint, had studied it in terms of its contribution to twentieth-century intellectual production, and so I knew that an analyst was basically a wild card. For these reasons I approached my preliminary appointment with trepidation. It was nearing the end of my first term in post on the day I first entered the analyst's office. She and I regarded each other in silence for a long moment, sizing each other up, establishing there and then the dynamic that would form the basis of all our future encounters. I speculated that she was accustomed to a certain amount of hostility and obfuscation from her patients; she was certainly keeping her cool, and so I was not surprised when finally, and quite calmly, she asked me to describe how I felt at semester's end. She seemed to be aware of the details of my employment, had evidently got hold of a file from which she gleaned this information, I wondered vaguely at the regularity of the rather leading line of questioning she pursued but in the end acquiesced to it. To begin with I explained that my life, thought of as a series of days which were discrete in themselves but nevertheless added up to a collective something, seemed inconceivable. I had now experienced over ten and a half thousand mornings. I had woken up as myself over ten and a half thousand times. What these days amounted to remained, I said, a sheer mystery to me. And yet, there were certain moments that seemed somehow to have been decisive, that seemed to have been formative, although I could not recall any of them offhand. I had looked my whole life long, I explained to the analyst, who rarely seemed to be paying attention and indeed sometimes openly read a newspaper as she sat before me, for some reason to carry on living. So far, this had been in vain. In fact, I continued, on the occasion of my last birthday, I became acutely aware of the fact that outside of existence, there was nobody. What I meant by this was that fundamentally, in a very real way, although I had attempted to work through the misery that had characterised my state of mind for as long as I could remember, as far back even as early childhood, what I had come to realise was that on the other side of this misery, there was nothing. My life had operated according to a narrative of progress which had, perhaps recently, or perhaps as long ago as a decade, broken down completely so that the futility of my own existence had been thrown into relief. When I thought, for instance, of how little I had accomplished in ten and a half thousand days, give or take, I was moved to despair. At this point, the analyst looked

at her watch. She laid the newspaper across her lap. Perhaps, she said, it might be useful to think of yourself instead as a slab of marble being carved down by a sculptor, which is to say by time, your life gradually taking shape. Imagine, continued the analyst, that in the first place this sculptor has only the vaguest idea of the human form, and, what's more, that he is not a sculptor per se but in fact primarily works in another occupation, in the factory, say, or the slaughterhouse, and sculpts on a part-time basis to supplement his wages, which are not in themselves sufficient to support his ever-growing family. So that as the sculptor carves, although perhaps chipping or even hacking might more accurately describe the action, he carves away until there is nothing left. Our lifetime, she said, is finite. For instance, she continued, she had opened her diary that morning and noticed, for the first time, though it was true it must always have been there, that underneath the date there were two numbers: one, indicating the current day of the year, and the other, indicating the number of days left. Although she was aware of the passage of time, it was nonetheless a jarring reminder to her, that morning, as she ate her muesli while simultaneously packing a lunch and tending to one of her pallid children, that our lives slipped away from us swiftly and forever. She stood up, indicating our session had ended, and escorted me to the door.

As I left the analyst's office – located not on the university campus or indeed within the city limits but in the western suburbs, a place accessible only by riding a series of buses owned by diverse companies, so that one's fare, which had to be paid in exact change, varied widely from bus to bus, as did the schedules, with buses arriving either all at once or not at all, the result of which being that commuters to this place in the western suburbs were in a state of perpetual confusion that bordered on hysteria – I noticed a woman with long blonde hair standing in the hallway. I felt that I recognised this person; I was sure I had seen her before in a familiar location. I watched as she opened the same door I had just come through and had shut conscientiously behind me, which is to say the analyst's door, and went inside.

It was some time before I saw this woman again. One day in November I stood at the window of my office eating my cheese sandwich, looking out at the rain, which had been falling ceaselessly for two and a half weeks. The river had already worn away some of its banks and an unspecified number of residents had had to be evacuated in boats, some in canoes, some in kayaks, some in rowboats and some in craft operated by the official coastguard. The university, being located at the top of a hill, had so far avoided being engulfed, although the fate of the train station and indeed the rest of the lower city was uncertain. As I looked out the window I saw a figure crossing the otherwise empty quadrangle. I recognised the woman immediately from the way she walked, a distinctive loping stride. She had reached the halfway point between the Arts building and the building that housed Politics and Social Sciences when she stopped dead. She turned her head and looked up at my building. In fact, she appeared to look up not just at the building but at the window where I was standing, and not just at the window but through the rain-streaked pane, through the pane, yes, and directly at me. She seemed, moreover, to nod, ever so slightly. Then, just as suddenly, she turned and disappeared into a doorway on the opposite side. I realised at that moment I had seen her before, earlier even than on the analyst's doorstep, yes, earlier than that. It seemed to me she might be the wife of one of the members of my department, I thought perhaps – I was fairly sure of it now – the wife of the Chair. She was herself, it was said, a political philosopher, or a moral philosopher, in any case a philosopher of some kind. The Chair was a difficult man, prone to passionate rages and protracted periods of despondency, and sometimes to both at once, lasting days or even weeks during which he disappeared from the department altogether. What was extraordinary about this encounter, if one could call it that, in which this woman stopped in the middle of the quadrangle in the pouring rain, turned her head, glanced at the building, her gaze seeming to fall not just on my window but through it and, by extension, directly on me, was that my office was located on the thirteenth floor, a number whose superstitious significance did not escape me, and although I was not disposed to such notions, I was all the same amused by the dark congruity of the number with my life, and indeed with the spirit of the times more generally. Nevertheless, in spite of its strangeness, I forgot about this latest

run-in with the woman almost immediately. I had not been sleeping well. I had woken in the night on multiple occasions with the feeling that there was someone in the room with me. Given that nobody aside from myself, with the exception of the letting agent who appeared unannounced for periodic inspections of the place, had entered the cottage since I arrived, the impression that my space had been trespassed upon was unsettling, to say the least. For the first few moments in which I found myself awake, I would lie still, listening for any unfamiliar sounds, or sniffing quietly for unfamiliar smells. Invariably I found nothing definitive; if now and then I thought I could identify the faintest trace of a smell I did not recognise, just as often the shapes and aromas in the darkened room seemed even more known to me than ever, and this terrible familiarity frightened me more than the idea of a malevolent stranger in the house. By and by, and I cannot explain this, the uneasy feeling pursued me into the daylight hours, as if I were being startled into an even deeper state of awakening by a malignant and disembodied force that dogged my steps, following my progress through the city. It came upon me, for instance, as I perused the fruit aisle in the supermarket, and then again in the pharmacy, where I at once felt as though I had grown enormous in size, a giant, all out of proportion with the bottles of shampoo and tubes of mascara. I squeezed myself down the aisle in the direction of the pharmacist's desk so that I could fill my prescription, which I had allowed to lapse for several weeks, not having the physical energy or indeed the mental wherewithal to, in the first place, deviate from my daily routine and, in the second place, to face the pharmacy with its unforgiving strip lighting and the openly antagonistic, even hostile, attitude of the pharmacist himself. I stayed up through the night watching through the curtains. I thought of the Yale lock on the front door, the flimsy catches on the window, the figure of a woman walking in the dark. I stood all the long nights, watching the street, wondering, What's going to happen?

Every evening that December, and indeed throughout the winter, I swam laps in the empty and blue municipal pool. I would emerge into the cold night streets with my hair steaming and go for a long walk. On Christmas Eve I walked over the hill and into the next village, passing by the church just as the congregation was singing Hark! The Herald Angels Sing. I sat on a bench facing the nearby pond, where a number of geese were bracing themselves against a rising wind. A few weeks earlier the authorities had pulled the body of a girl out of the water. Her clothing had been found, discarded, on the hillside. I recalled reading that when the body's temperature drops to twenty-nine degrees, people freezing to death tear off their clothing, a phenomenon referred to as paradoxical undressing. Scientists are not clear as to the precise causes, although it has been suggested that shortly before a person loses consciousness, the blood vessels near the skin's surface, constricted from the cold, suddenly dilate, producing a sensation of extreme heat against the skin. We catch fire, burn up and wink out with an astonishing rapidity, I thought, sitting on the bench, idly watching the geese. A series of disjointed phrases ran through my mind: A pond for the children to die in. A hill to die upon. Is this the hill? The pond? This the bench? And then: Here at least we shall be free. The truth is, I once read, we all try to find some kind of dignity in our loneliness. There is little we can say in defence of these insane tribulations, according to one poet, except perhaps that they are a supreme act of love.

The first research seminar in the new year, on the poet John Clare, was delivered by a visiting lecturer from Potsdam, so that the atmosphere of cruelty that commonly reigned in the department was veiled by an excess of joviality. During the wine reception, one of my colleagues engaged me in conversation about a film he had seen, and which I had not, that depicted a small boy shooting one of his classmates with a bolt gun, commonly used for killing pigs, and subsequently implicating his parents in his crime. The colleague stood very close to me, fondling the front of his trousers. He smelt of the whisky he had been pouring into his wine glass from a flask he kept tucked in the pocket of his shirt. He was not a bad-looking man, indeed he wore his clothes very well, and the tightness forming at the front of his trousers which were, in themselves, very well cut, and which he continued, as he spoke to me, absent-mindedly to stroke, suggested a not insignificant piece of equipment. No, he was not bad-looking, merely repugnant in the ordinary way of men, evoking in me a parallel disgust that was as commonplace as it was primal. In effect, though I was sexually interested in men, I was at the same time profoundly sickened by them. Their bodies, their voices, their weakness and incompetence. My feelings alternated between pity and loathing, one often leading to the other. If, for instance, I pitied a man having a solitary lunch at a deli counter, in the same breath I despised him for his helplessness. If on the other hand I loathed a man I had just met due to some superficial characteristic such as the way he chewed his food or the way his chin receded into his neck, or else because of something more profound but which it was equally outside of this man's power to change, I pitied him alike for his ignorance of the fact of his life, a life which was repellent through and through. As I pondered my colleague, as he inched his body closer and closer to mine, I was overwhelmed with a sense of the hopelessness of it all. I turned away from him to the table that held the remaining bottles of wine. I saw standing there, in apparent contemplation of the canapés that lay cold on their metal trays, a woman. To be more precise, the woman I saw standing there was a woman I had seen before, at the analyst's office and then again crossing the campus quadrangle. She observed me as I approached.

We had, as it happened, met each other before. In fact, she informed me, as she handed me an unopened bottle of wine, tucking still another underneath her left arm while guiding me up the stairs towards the roof with her right, she had sat on my interview panel. She had come down to meet me at reception, walking me up the six flights of stairs so quickly that I was quite out of breath and red in the face when I arrived in the boardroom. She had said very little, frequently looking out the window in an attitude not dissimilar to that of the rest of the hiring committee, and which bespoke boredom and impatience with my responses. I had altogether wiped the experience from my memory until that moment. I now recalled feeling taunted by the other panel members. Her name was Clara, she said, lighting the cigarette she had placed between my lips. There were a number of mismatched chairs arranged in a loose circle on the roof, of which we chose two to sit on, and we sat smoking, sipping every so often from the purloined bottles of wine, hers white and mine red, and watching the lights of the city. I regarded her in silence. I watched her hands. I watched their gestures. I watched them as they drew her hair back into a brown clip. I watched them stay a moment at her neck. I did not know how to ask the questions that would draw her out, but she spoke as if responding to this impulse of mine, outlining her work and her history and many other things besides, the details of which I would not remember but which nevertheless made an impression on me – of something entire, at once dark and luminous, like igneous rock, or the hollow of a wave. She spoke rapidly and fluently on all manner of things. She seemed to know about my previous research, on which subject she questioned me at length, listening to my faltering replies with careful attention. It was as though she were spooling understanding out of me, steadily, slowly, turning the reel. My skin was tingling. I felt that Clara was bringing the things I said into being, that my thoughts were being admitted to the sensible universe, transformed into atoms of pure glass one could hold in the palm of one's hand, turn over and over. At intervals she would look away, nodding. From the very beginning there were certain indefinable concordances between us, things that invited intimacy. She regarded me then, and in that instant I saw that she had my number, yes, she had me pegged, I would be held fast. And yet I knew too that she would keep her own counsel. She would not be drawn in. There was something

remote about her. Not cold: in fact, her speech seemed to fall on me warmly, gently, but as though from a very great distance. It was as if, sitting in front of me, there were some reason to doubt the reality of her presence. Nevertheless, there she was.

It is difficult to determine the course of events with any precision, the order in which things happened, or whether the things that happened were of any significance. A good thinker. Now how many times would she say that. How many times would I hear her say that, sitting in the pub, standing in the rain, lying on the rug. A good thinker. And always I felt something give. Like stones tumbling off a hillside, quietly, quietly, but presaging something greater. And then this pressure behind it all, pushing towards a precipice. What was it she said in the café? The clocks had changed. It was spring. We lost an hour. A quiet catastrophe. Yes. A good thinker. Could I be that, too? I always looked to her. She turned my ideas round and round in her hands. When we met it was like standing still as a great wind tore the roofs off the city. It was at the seminar on the poet John Clare. The carpet was diamond-patterned. I wanted nothing more than to lie down upon this carpet and to be still for a long time.

Our first rendezvous was at a bar in an area of the city centre I had never been to, although I spent, as I said, many days walking from one end of the city to the other and then back again, always back again. The place did not come up in any Internet search, it had only recently opened, and the map in my phone seemed unable even to locate the street Clara had mentioned. Nevertheless, I progressed to the junction she had explained was nearby and tried to follow the directions she had offered. I had used to like walking in the city at night, loved the night smells and how they changed across the seasons, especially the blue and wide open smell of spring, of things melting away, yes, I loved that smell although I knew it brought danger with it, who knows what kinds of things I was capable of in the springtime, what cruelties great and small. Now at night I watched people closely as they passed me by on the pavement, sensed the presence of their inside selves thinking and feeling as they looked at their reflections in the window of a betting shop or else buttoned their coats against a sudden wind. I could see all at once that process of rising in the morning and dressing, deliberately or from a pile of clothing discarded on the floor, regarding themselves in the mirror as they brushed their teeth, muttering a word of encouragement to carry on with the morning, to see what it might hold, some small pleasure in spite of everything, perhaps, they thought, pulling on their favourite shirt, choosing a pair of socks, adjusting their hat just so. It was unbearable. I felt like the exposed root of a tooth in the mouth of the world as it wolfed down the day. I could not tell quite how I had arrived at the appointed street, Mushroom Lane, but I had, and found that it terminated, after running for about thirty metres, in a chain-link fence. There was no sign of a drinking establishment of any kind. It was dark. It was true that my whole life long I was sure any overture made in the spirit of friendship or attraction was a ruse of some kind, a trick to draw me into some dangerous place or nefarious deal, in fact the first boy who asked me to be his girlfriend left the assignation in tears after I demanded to know who had put him up to it. I had always been suspicious, and with good reason, I thought, standing in Mushroom Lane, in the dark, aware of the noises of the city which seemed now far away. The little I knew of Clara suggested she might be capable of misleading me into an empty lane at night, for reasons discernible only to her. I felt even then that she had some

secret capacity to see into the distance but also up close, so very close, as though she could see into me but also beyond into some future that remained dark to everyone else. If she had led me into this empty lane at night she was sure to have a reason, I thought, feeling a kind of fire blow through me. I turned back towards the cross street and saw a man walking in my direction. He walked like any man and as he approached, he smiled. In that moment it was not fear that gripped me, no, but fury at the way he was in the world and the way I was, the frictionless manner by which he progressed through the city, while I crept low to the ground like a slug, my soft and slimy body licking the tarmac, aware of the perils awaiting me above and below but basically powerless to stop them coming. And he smiled. I wanted to whip him. I wanted to flay him alive. I wanted to cut him, at least a little bit, in fact was in the process of searching with one hand through my bag for something sharp as the other fumbled for the mobile phone I had replaced in my pocket. The man walked right by me and turned left just before the chain-link fence into an archway I had not noticed that led to a walled-in garden where I now saw Clara sitting at one of the picnic tables. She had already seen me, and as I sat down she poured out a second glass of the wine she was drinking.

What did we talk about then? Clara's love affairs, her detours and deferrals, the men and women she had brought low, bear with me, who were mesmerised by the distance between her eloquence and her accent, they got off on her precarious upbringing, the rise and fall of her fortunes, the rise again, people loved an irregular trajectory so long as it ended well, she enjoyed watching them lap it up, the reverence with which they treated her, reverence she had seen the other side of from people just like them, but it would be wrong to think of it as revenge, no, she enjoyed an experiment, and while she enjoyed sex she was not so interested in intimacy, in any case she was married, as I had suspected, to the Chair of my department, of whom she at times felt fond. In short I had no idea whether I could believe a word she was saying, whether she was a storyteller, a spinner of yarns, a bullshit artist or the real thing altogether: someone who approached life completely in earnest, a person who in fact took herself and her right to exist seriously. She was absent and electric all at once, and I knew that more than anything else I wanted her to carry on, to keep talking, because so long as she did I felt something was being kept open, her sentences constellations of ruptures in my desire for order, her words a kind of gesture of opening and opening.

Months went by, and I did not think of the note that had been slipped under my office door, occupied as I was with the nature of my evolving intimacy with Clara. During this time I was nominally trying to think through the relationship between language and suffering. If violence was distinguished by its instrumental character ... What was it? Was it that I believed in everyday suffering? My only certainty up to then had been my commonplace nature, the unremarkable content of my character which, after all, one could not merely renounce. In the pursuit of affliction, perhaps one could slough it all off, one could be purified. I could be otherwise. I saw in Clara a kind of genius made possible by a refusal of the world, of the body and its various urgencies, and I too wanted my body to become a vehicle for the pure idea. I wanted to eradicate the sadness I had felt since I was girl but which seemed to me now an extravagance. But where I had chosen confinement and control, had followed the rules, Clara refused the terms of engagement altogether. And what was so incredible was that she assumed, I think, the same of me. As I poured the coffee each morning, I wondered, What's going to happen?

After an extended period of time in which I had spoken to barely anyone at all, I found myself in the position of spending nearly every waking moment with Clara. One night, we sat together at my kitchen table, drinking whisky. Why, she wanted to know, do we bother with these consoling fictions. Why, for instance, do we say setback, she went on, when in fact what we mean is meltdown. Her husband the Chair had recently been granted a leave of absence following a setback brought on by Clara's having left him. She had moved into my spare room. Each day, in small, almost unnoticeable increments, the cottage filled up with her books. I never saw the volumes arrive, but when I went into the hallway, there they were, standing in precarious stacks against the walls and in smaller piles around the sofa. There never was any discussion on the subject of her moving in; quite simply one day there she was, striding up the path with a suitcase as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Day by day she grew to inhabit the cottage much more convincingly than I ever had. I began to feel as though it was Clara who had been living in the cottage for the past year, living every detail precisely as I did; the notebook laid down by the open window, the glasses discarded on the kitchen counter, the keys hung on the hook. Had I ever really been in the place? It became clear to me that I was an interloper, that every time I crossed the threshold of the cottage I was committing the most contemptible act of trespass.

I bought Clara a rack for her clothes and gave over half of my chest of drawers. It did not seem to matter, for we dressed alike in any case, in loose monochromatic garments, she fair and I dark, she curvy, I bony. I was aware of people looking at us as we walked together in the street, which we did often, long walks early in the morning, in the late afternoon, even in the middle of the night, Clara would wake me, urging me to get dressed. We walked through the empty city as if we had a right to it, as if it belonged to us, as if we had reclaimed it from all the events of the past year and a half. But still, and more than ever, I felt like a lamb flaunting herself under the eye of a butcher. Still, in the middle of the morning, I could hear the church bells ringing out the hour, the same whisper one writer – was it Lawrence? – heard coming from the dark trees of America: doom, doom, doom. Doom of our white day. What was going to happen?

I had lived with a man, that much was undeniable. But Clara was my first friend. Before Clara, on every train journey I took, I experienced a sensation of vertigo. So often I had found myself on the way to a place I had never been, travelling from a place I lived in but had no connection to. I was not married. I had no family. No one knew where I was. The relentless train journeys to interview in various parts of the country might have given the impression of a life in motion, only mine was stopped. Once I had been summoned to a small town on the east coast. The night before the interview I sat in the hotel bar getting drunk and watching women's gymnastics. I read in the paper that a dog had savaged a man in a town twenty miles north. I was far from home. In those months of pointless journeying, the only thing anybody said to me was No bother. For days. No bother. No bother. Then Clara swept into my life like a fugitive wind, and all at once I started to remember things. Morning in the house, steam rising off the lake, trees swaying mutely on the far side, the loon calling. The smell of coffee brewing and my mother toasting bread. A long time ago and in another place. But the feeling remained. Through the long spring and the summer that followed we were in each other's company. Often I find myself wondering what we looked like and what we spoke about. To an observer, it is possible we would have appeared to be new acquaintances, given the ambivalent relation of her expansive gestures to the closeness with which I held myself – a misleading tableau in that it suggests Clara sought to impress me with her demonstrations. Of course at a distance an observer could not know that Clara motioned in impatience at my slow responses and tentative reciprocation, the indeterminacy of my outlines. But then it may be too that she gestured in an effort to grasp my words from the air that stole them, that she could not ask for them again because each of her thoughts was so singular as to be unrepeatable and she assumed the same of mine. On balance I think this unlikely, but then again, how could any watcher know what passed between us, when the breath of the world seemed to carry off our exchanges as they happened? In my memory I see Clara ahead of me, looking over her shoulder to offer some brief and penetrating insight as she walks away.

Clara had come from a long line of women suicides. It was clear from earliest girlhood, she said, by the way they sucked their thumbs or how they crawled into dark places in the garden, that each was an incipient catastrophe. Very little was known about these women – they, their families or contemporaries had destroyed all documents pertaining to their histories. What was left over from a life, after all, said Clara. Nothing so prosaic as a bottle of pills, but what remained reflected an unnameable yearning and a wish, finally, to stay still. Clara had travelled here and there, climbing into dusty attics and leafing through parish registers, searching high and low for some clue that would piece it all together. We knew nothing about our own lives, she said, shifting in her chair. We were drinking wine at the kitchen table, looking through the open window onto the garden and the evening. Outside a quiet rain fell. She wanted, more than anything, to be able to say definitively that they were this or she was that. And so she compiled an archive of the orts and scraps of their lives. Now I think she was searching for proof of her own existence, proof that what she was, the choices she made, were grounded in a kind of landscape of accreted characteristics. And she was trying to describe the borders of it, like a surveyor or a prospector probing the value of it all. I felt hurt by this impulse of hers although I could not say why. It was a process of exclusion, yes, but she was also looking for a way forward and perhaps away from the life she was living at present. I was afraid suddenly of being mapped out, consigned to the fringes or else banished altogether. On the other hand, I was interested in the notion that the limits of one's life had been marked out long before one ever existed. I was interested above all in what this line of thinking suggested about Clara – that she too was afraid of what was to come, of the darkness, of a certain barely perceptible inconsistency in her way of being in the world. The appearance of singularity she presented was not as assured as I had supposed at first. Between her and the pure idea, the world interposed – behind it all there remained the quiet reminder that for us, for her too, much would be refused in advance. But there was a flaw in her logic somewhere, a misrecognition that prevented her from assimilating this set of facts in any comprehensive way. And what would I leave behind me? I thought of my notebooks and their haphazard entries, the disjointed train of thought they evoked. I wondered what meaning Clara might make of

these remains, the kind of reading they would demand. I almost understood something then about Clara and about me, separately and together, about the two of us and the nature of the thing existing between us. Of course it was about power, and then something else. But as I watched her tapping the edge of her glass with the tips of her fingers I could not remember the word for it. It was a problem of language, of falling short, of what can be spoken and what must never be spoken. At the same time, it seemed to me that the production of Clara's archive meant that after all was said and done these were women who survived against their will. The window held her reflection as she looked out onto the garden, although perhaps she too was seeing our outlines in the glass, for I think that, for a moment, our eyes met. Who will remember me now?

In some ways I knew that my life had been decided long ago, that the flight I had pursued my whole life long was a delusion. And yet Clara seemed to offer me respite from my obsession with my own insignificance, her refusal to engage in my tortuous speculations about my own inner life was a form of care. She was so often right, there was much one wanted to forget in any case. When I went for walks, in unfamiliar countryside or through certain parts of the city, I would at times begin to feel strange, and a moment would come back to me, from long before, when a man brought me to a municipal pool in the middle of the night. I was drunk and climbed the fence with difficulty, the man much older and taller boosted me up and over, we stripped to our underwear, I must have thought he was a man who would look but not touch, not anyway that night, thought perhaps that I was still being assessed against some unknown criteria, but all at once I felt a sense of trepidation that I had nonetheless set something in motion that could not be arrested, something that would erupt on a night completely unrelated to that one when he would find me alone in an empty street. I wanted to get rid of this feeling and dove into the water without thinking. My chin hit the bottom of the shallow end hard. Something happened to me then, motionless and stunned in the warm water, which was lit underneath its surface by lights carefully concealed in the walls of the pool. Ever since, as I had travelled by train between beautiful places, or done something unexpected, out of character, or for whatever reason beyond the edges of the scrap of existence I had torn out, I wondered whether the whole of my life, from those long, blue seconds in the pool, had been only a series of images projected by my brain, in the state of overcharged perceptual neural activity that occurs in the moments preceding death. I sometimes wondered how Clara would respond to this hypothesis, perhaps by once more explaining to me that our lives, the gestures that made them up, were themselves movements towards their own reality. And yet I knew I should not ask. It was just that I felt always on the verge of some rapturous or awful experience, I often felt paralysed, I was afraid. One day in February, while I was lying on the sofa in the living room observing a mark on the ceiling, Clara sitting in her chair reading, pencil in hand, I finally put the situation to her. She looked up from her book and shook her head, making it clear with a fleeting change in expression that she found this line of

questioning to be banal in the extreme. She sighed, crossing over to the shelves lined with her books, and opened one, seemingly at random. She began to write on a slip of paper that marked a page in the book, studiously avoiding my gaze. Do you accept your own gestures and symbols? Do you believe what you yourself say? When you act, do you believe what you are doing? I considered this. Naturally the answer to this strange series of questions was a resounding no, surely Clara understood that, she apprehended the most minute alterations in my state of mind long before I did and so she had without a doubt answered these questions, which gestured towards the most basic facts of my existence, prior to their being asked. And so what I considered then was what drove her to ask these questions, the answers to which she knew already, at this particular moment of our interaction. What, I wondered, not for the first time, was the nature of our relation? What was its structure? I was silent for a long time. Look, she said, what difference did it make to me in any case? The result was still the same. Could the two situations, death in life and life in death, actually be differentiated materially in my case? That is to say, had the conditions of my life or the way in which I chose to live it, because it is a choice as I surely knew, Clara said, been affected in any way by this childish flight of mine? I was being self-indulgent. I remembered something I had been reading: Each successive gesture concretises itself as an absolute existence, so can there be total victory, let alone annihilation? Was it even possible to fix a time of death? In other words, so what?

At times I can't quite remember what she was like. I knew almost nothing about her childhood, her adolescence, her life before coming to the university. And as I say I did not know how to ask the right questions. An accurate portrait is in any case impossible, all that is left now is my memory of the moments in which I knew her, and I am not sure I can be trusted; she surely has changed since then, I myself have changed since then, one changes from moment to moment. Though we might meet every day of our lives, we meet each time as strangers. What do we see when we look back down the years? We rewrite it all. The quality that caused me to question her materiality on the rooftop that first night, which seemed now to exist in a different order of time, was her untouchability. She swept whole over the surface of the world. She was not overcome. I saw myself in a flash as a person in the world, caught in a complex system of relations, of obligations, an object as well as an individual, but too close to my surroundings to draw any objective conclusions. In spite of my efforts to divest, to rationalise, to make myself spare and hard, I bloated with the world. Clara on the other hand was a person one could admire, she had integrity, a kind of inflexibility that one could put one's trust in, she possessed a conviction which my life had until then lacked. She opened everything up, made everything distinct – in her attention I could discern myself. But things pass away. We must always be starting again, and after all that is no easy task when there is so much inside us that is unspoken. She was so brilliant. She was my friend. If there was a connection between Clara and the note I had received, she gave no indication of it, not at that time nor at any time subsequently.

Should we tell the truth, in conditions when the truth is not bearable?

It was a long spring that year, the first year I knew Clara. Outside, things opened and were drenched. In the allotment gardens lettuces went to rot. Leaves unfolded on the trees in strange and monstrous shapes. The trunks swelled. I found the second note on a day of grey skies, and one could almost read in the low clouds our general undoing. It had been slipped into my pigeonhole in the administrative office, a place I did not in the main visit and would not have done except that the very affable course administrator was so surprised to see any correspondence addressed to my name that she phoned my office. The ringing went on and on, I nearly did not answer it, the only people who typically used the number were from immigration compliance, or from human resources, and they phoned everyone, citizens and non-citizens alike, they were not particularly bothered, their objective was merely to unsettle, to make visible the state of constant surveillance under which we all lived, and so the calls arrived regularly and at odd hours. I sat in my ergonomic chair from one darkness to the next, listening to the phone ring, watching the clouds pass, watching the crows. All life, particularly now, particularly in the present moment, I thought, as I spun around and around in my chair, clutching the note in one hand, was an insoluble problem. How much destruction we have wrought in our lives on our surroundings was anyone's guess but at any rate each day that passed was a further reminder that we have compromised the very ground we walk on. After a while, summer came.

We spent most of our time reading and drinking in the cottage's small garden. Clara was very brown from the sun, she wore white that summer, she wore a hat. One evening she cooked dinner, something with mushrooms, served it outside as bats flashed from the eaves. She was buzzing, she seemed happy. She filled our glasses and stood up, suddenly, her head to one side as if she were listening for something. The neighbour was playing music very softly, I could not make it out. But Clara began swaying her hips. She moved slowly, her arms in the air. The movement seemed to have arisen so naturally from what had passed before that I barely registered it as strange. And yet I could not take my eyes off her. She smiled at me, beckoned me over. I stood near her, heavy, graceless, as she carried on her peculiar dance. I still could not hear the music. We went on like that for a very long time.

Clara was not much of a swimmer, disliked the seaside, and so each Sunday in July I set out early, on my own, to the beach. I swam out and out in the cold water, watching the boats traverse the bay, watching the sky as it changed colour. I did not think of anything at all during those swims, my head stayed clear and empty, until gradually even the sounds and sensations of my surroundings fell away. It was only once I had towelled myself off and dressed that I perceived someone trying to get my attention one morning. There was a woman sitting outside the café on the pier who appeared to be waving at me. I thought she must have mistaken me for someone else and started walking in the opposite direction, but she called out my name. She did it in a way that made me turn around, retrace my steps, progress towards the table at which she was sitting, and stop. But it was only one of my colleagues, she worked on Yeats, I could not for the life of me understand why she hailed me in so familiar and congenial a manner. I was surprised that she knew my first name, that she had recognised me at a distance, that she seemed to want me to join her for coffee at the table she was occupying. Nevertheless I did sit down, out of curiosity more than interest in carrying on any exchange with this woman, and she talked pleasantly for a while about the travails of having children, how her work had suffered, how she had manoeuvred her husband into taking charge of them on Sunday mornings so that she could have one single second of peace, of time to herself, what a pleasant surprise it was to run into me of all people. I wondered what she wanted. She was respected in her field, could not possibly expect to gain anything from a strategic alliance or enmity with me, and eventually I concluded that she must merely be lonely. I revelled, briefly. I relaxed. She bought me a coffee, and, while nodding sympathetically at the lengthy account of her grievances, I watched the people passing by. At intervals I offered some encouraging comments of my own, which I cannot now remember but which seemed to satisfy the requirements of the encounter. In the time that elapsed since I had taken a seat, the pier had filled up, busy now with families toing and froing, toddlers on scooters, the elderly being pushed along in chairs by their descendants. I had finished my coffee, the time had nearly come for the Yeats scholar and me to say our goodbyes, and just as I was about to rise from my seat, I saw Clara emerge from the crowd. She looked – I do not

know exactly how to describe it. She seemed to be waiting. I excused myself from the Yeats scholar and walked over to Clara, ready to explain myself, at once I felt blameworthy in some obscure way, but she merely began speaking as if resuming a conversation only briefly interrupted, and we progressed down the promenade. She told me about the history of the Turkish baths we were just passing, how she had long been interested in the implied connection between the sensual and the spiritual, that she would be very interested in trying out ritual ablution, perhaps I might accompany her some time. She would understand if I declined, she continued, she respected my Sunday morning routine, had given me my space, although, she pointed out, I should be wary of our esteemed colleague, with whom she had not known I was acquainted. Something had passed between them, it was suggested, a power struggle of some kind ending in an uneasy truce. In any case, and in her opinion, Clara said, the woman's interest in Yeats was suspect, likely motivated by an underlying strain in her intellectual production that could be described as fascist-apologist. The manner in which the topic had been introduced disconcerted me, but the rest of what Clara had said was not particularly surprising – the woman had demonstrated even in our brief interaction a slight sycophancy, coupled with some secondary cloying aspect characteristic of such people. It was evident in her efforts to conscript me at once by intimating I was in her confidence, that I was a trusted companion even though we were in fact speaking for the first time. In my experience there was a flip side to such precipitate advances, this was not my first turn around the block, I had been collected before. In any case, I trusted Clara's judgment, and we left it at that. And yet sometimes actions reverberate in ways impossible to foresee. Sometimes, I thought of Clara's expression as she stood still on the boardwalk.

I had noticed that it was one of the banalities of train travel that in spite of the apparent and ubiquitous signage on the walls, doors and windows of the quiet coach, people persisted in offering, aloud, their thoughts on such topics as their travels – that is to say, where they were coming from and where they were going and, moreover, how they felt about it – or the passing landscape – very green, by all accounts, unless it was purple, or brown, or some mixture of the three – or else their life’s trajectory – including their boyhood dreams and whether and to what extent these dreams had been realised in their adulthood. The loathing I felt for these people, whose dreams, after all, seemed to mean as much to them as mine might have meant to me, and with whom I therefore should have felt some connection based on our shared humanity, at the very least our shared disappointment in the lot life had parcelled out to us, was absolute, and it was the conclusiveness of the sentiment that I found puzzling. Later, it seemed to me there was something meaningful about the breach of the silence mandated in the quiet coach and my bad feelings about it, seemingly in excess of their object. For instance, why was it that laughter in this setting seemed so unacceptable? Why was it that women’s voices, in the quiet coach, seemed particularly to rankle? Why did these things inhibit my ability to work on the train, to regard the line of poplars in a field? Yes, later, much later, it seemed to me meaningful.

A different recovery of the world is required of us.

An unexpected development occurred around the beginning of the new academic year, namely that the students began to mobilise. Their occupation of the university began with an administrative building, followed by a number of lecture theatres. As time went on, more and more buildings fell into the hands of the occupiers and were repurposed for their clandestine operations. In an interview with a local news affiliate, one of the movement's leaders asserted that the order imposed on the city at the current time, masquerading as peace, was in fact the manner through which the authorities waged war by other means. Peace, said the student, is today, in this country, in this city, even on this very university campus, the actual development of techniques of warfare. We the students of this university assert our right to, and indeed our ownership of, the spaces of the campus. The hallmark of authority is unquestioning recognition on the part of those who are asked to obey. We know that this is not natural or inevitable, and so we seek to unmask it. Furthermore, we the students argue that the greatest enemy of authority is contempt, and so we proclaim that this occupation is a demonstration of contempt. We argue that the surest way to undermine authority is laughter, and so we laugh, in the face of everything, in spite of it all. As he concluded his statement, one could hear echoing, in the stairwell and in the corridor that rolled out behind the student leader, a laughter, disembodied and sexless, now loud, now quiet. The next morning the local paper ran an editorial under the headline: this is not a revolution: it's a joke.

Although in the beginning the press had reported on the initial disappearance of the two girls outside of the public library, and although the girls were, as far as one could tell, still missing, there never was any follow-up. Those first reports of their disappearance had been attended by the arrival of the search helicopters, but soon enough the girls themselves faded into obscurity while the searches carried on. I began to wonder whether I had in fact invented this story of the girls as a way of explaining the constant presence in the skies of the whirring aircraft. Perhaps, it occurred to me, the helicopters had not arrived so much as they had always been there, had preceded even me, my presence in the environs. On other days I wondered whether there had been a tacit, if media-wide, conspiracy to assist local government in introducing the search helicopters into the day-to-day life of the county with as little resistance from the populace as possible. I had read somewhere that strength lies in forcing people to accept the unacceptable – not just what is unlikely to be borne, but what is unbelievable, that is to say, what is actually untrue. The figure of the child was a useful one, the ongoing moral panic about children, and particularly girls, had perhaps been raised as a convenient way of mobilising public feeling, but the ends to which this might have been done eluded me. Why did any ruling class seek to extend its authority? Why in fact did they do anything? Disasters happened, a crisis of confidence, opportunities arose. It was interesting, I reflected, that although I could not recall actually seeing a photograph purporting to be of the girls, it had been made clear in certain ways in those first and, it seemed now, only, reports, that the little girls were fair, red-cheeked. If being around Clara had caused me to begin remembering things about myself, it had at the same time pulled back the cotton wool quality of the days, the events happening around me became more distinct, they became knife-like. And these events demanded attention. What was needed, I felt, vaguely, was a reckoning, it was no longer enough merely to know what was happening, which was a problem in itself; one must also allow oneself to be changed by the knowledge, unbearable though it may seem, however much one might lose. One needed above all to find a way through, a way past the self-recrimination that fell like a sheet of glass between oneself and the world. It was a problem of attention. I liked this line of thinking and yet not for the first time I felt I

was retracing the thoughts of someone else, it occurred to me that I was basically a thief, absolutely a fraud, every word I had ever written cherry-picked from a rather narrow and certainly biased corpus of texts. In any case the capacity for sustained attention was exactly what I did not have. The hours pursued their obscure course, and I lagged behind, watching them recede into the distance. But in spite of everything, the days had their routine, punctuated in space if not always in time by the helicopters. That at least was something. Each night, the searchlights touched down upon the street as soon as dusk began to gather. Sometimes they settled onto the kerb and sat there, without moving, as far as I could tell, through the night. Clara must have seen them too, though we never discussed it, our sphere of interaction had its limits, and I spent many nights on my own, peering out of the curtains, trying to discern some meaning in the stationary beams of light.

I can see even now the particular way Clara had of looking over her reading glasses at me as she sat working at the kitchen table, which was often, even all the time. That autumn, she was working at a pace that seemed unsustainable, producing reams of pages that were published with astonishing regularity: even the publication process seemed accelerated for her. Reviewers who ordinarily held sharply opposing views on a subject were brought into agreement by Clara's research, which they said was both rigorous and wide-ranging. I was conscious, as we drank wine, or watched a documentary on Vietnam together on the sofa, or took long walks, that her mind whirred on and on while mine had been stagnant for months, a stagnation to which there was no end in sight, as far as I was concerned. Not only had I been unable to process even the simplest snatches of information, I had not written a single word. In fact I could barely read. When I brought this up with Clara one afternoon as she sat writing, she suggested that I had allowed myself to descend further and further into the realms of abjection in an effort to make myself interesting. Perhaps, she said, it was for the best that I could not write, for if I could not write, I would not then compromise myself in the ways I had previously described to her – that is, in ways that were, when one looked closely, actually relatively shameful. If it was indeed the case, Clara went on, continuing, as she spoke, to write longhand on one of the many pieces of paper that she had before her, that everything I had hitherto written, all the beliefs that had structured my way of thinking and indeed my scholarship, such as it was, she said, lifting an eyebrow, if all that was true, and she had no reason to doubt my word on it, then it was for the best that I should pack it all in since what could I be expected to produce besides the most grievous errors and even prevarications? She could not see what I was so worried about; I had to admit that although I may at one point have been a good thinker, this was evidently no longer the case. Through a combination of laziness and self-pity, she said, rising and beginning to close the door in my face, whatever chance I had at brilliance had come and indeed would continue to come to nothing. All this flapping of wings, and the constraints were of my own making. The door was shut. I sat down on the sofa and pulled my legs up under me. I breathed slowly and evenly. Clara had been under a lot of pressure, I reasoned, the publication schedule was catching up with her,

there were certain legal complications to do with her marriage to the Chair, there were any number of reasons for this outburst. Besides, I had been fishing, yes, fishing for words of support that were simply not in Clara to say, I knew that, it was pitiful, I had never relied on anyone before now, I had slipped up. They were true, in any case, the things she said, she was merely articulating the essential facts about myself as I had understood them. It seemed natural for Clara to give expression to the secrets of my inner life in this way. I was almost grateful to her, that is, I would have been grateful, I felt, hugging my knees to my chest, had I not been such a coward. Yes, Clara had a way of calling one's bluff, of finding one out. She rooted around the lumber room of one's heart until she had got hold of whatever it was, one's mortal dread, one's fear, which one had tucked away in a final daring if ultimately doomed attempt at self-preservation. It was not cruelty, exactly – in fact I think she saw her behaviour as a gesture of goodwill. She was rational and reasonable and she hoped to provoke this same rationality and reason in the thoughts and actions of the people around her. She was a closed, autonomous and self-sufficient system. What did she see in me? It is a question to which one scarcely wanted an answer. When we looked at each other, did we see far off a horizon of possibility, or merely a kind of infinite recursion? A pressure behind it all, pushing towards a precipice. If I had learned anything it was not to look too closely, that proximity was not truth, nothing was assured. And so I was grateful to her. With Clara, the dread that pressed in on all sides, the constant hum of trepidation that was so enervating, that leached the light from the days, blurring their edges, seemed to subside.

I yam what I yam and that's all.

Revolution or joke, classes had been cancelled, in part because the authorities were struggling to find the relevant legal clause that would enable them to evict the students. I found myself one afternoon in the city's botanical gardens. I stood in a circle of redwoods, listening to the sound of the rain in the needles. The trees were native to the Sierra Nevada, and according to the plaques affixed to their trunks, they had been planted at the height of the American Civil War. I could not decipher the relevance of this last pronouncement. If it were merely a matter of emphasising their oldness, why not simply state the year the trees had been planted? Was there some specific political significance of the redwood for the Civil War, I wondered, that was lost on me? It would not be the first time, I reflected, as I entered the visitor centre on the west side of the gardens, where insects of various kinds were on display in glass cases. It was warm and humid in the room, empty except for an invigilator sitting on a tall stool. As I stood inspecting the aphids crawling along the various leaves or twigs that had been placed in the cases for just this purpose, the invigilator came over to stand beside me. She was studying botany, she said, although of course these days they called it Plant Sciences. Initially she had thought to study geology, she had always loved hard things, was never that interested in plants, but she was also an indecisive sort of person, as a girl she had been known for her hesitation, her inability to make her mind up one way or the other. She could recall once as a small child being asked to select a colour to paint with. Her nursery school teacher held out the pots of green and blue paint before her. As far as she was concerned, a decision either way would be construed as a slight. Which would she hurt, the green or the blue? Which would be more likely to recover from its rejection? Blue, perhaps, since it was a clear favourite amongst the nursery pupils. On the other hand, green was just as well-used, if not so well-loved, so many things in the world were green. She had wept. She had not painted. She had run out of time. So it was that she found herself studying botany at the university. She worked at the gardens two days a week, getting to know the plants, she liked the pondweeds best though it was unfashionable to say so, the mosses and the alpine plants were generally preferred. But pondweeds were her passion, she said. It would surprise me to know, perhaps, that pondweeds could arouse such feeling, but she was not alone, it was in fact the modest

pondweed that was at the centre of a heated dispute during the war. Today, she said, we remembered the home front, the war, as a period of time when the country stood together. Not at all, not at all. Over the course of her research, she had found, published in the Occasional Notes of a certain university department, a denunciation of a pair of botanists. The author of the note alleged that this pair of botanists had borrowed a collection of his rare plants, more specifically pondweeds, obtained by him with some difficulty after hiking into various mountain ranges, and, without his consent, had used the samples for the production of a floristic paper, the author's own area of expertise. Aside from the brazen appropriation of the results of his work, he wrote in his corrigendum, in any case the conclusions this pair of highway robbers drew in the resulting paper were basically unsound; in fact, the paper's implications, he continued, were tendentious in the extreme, constituting little more than a misleading tirade. Even so the editor of the journal in which the offending piece of writing had been published refused to retract the paper, had furthermore refused to publish the author's own rejoinder, and there ensued a vitriolic public feud: samples were destroyed, reputations were ruined and the scientific record was left incomplete for years. The spectacle was, she said, highly entertaining, and indicative, moreover, of the fervour pondweed could arouse. Through the window I could see that it had stopped raining. I excused myself and went outside, leaving the confines of the gardens and walking in a direction I had not followed before. Soon I was lost and had to use the map on my phone to orient myself. I did not like to take it out in the street, I had heard there was a thief running around the city posing as a jogger and tearing phones out of people's hands as they scrolled through the news, and so I went into a nearby pub. I sat down at the bar and ordered a glass of wine. According to my phone, I had walked too far south: I had merely to proceed in the direction from which I had come and I would soon be back in a familiar area. In the meantime, I looked around. The pub was dark, richly panelled and full of mirrors. It was warm and dry and noisy. I felt, all at once, that I was being watched. The tables all around me were populated mostly by women, co-workers perhaps, out for a drink after a long day. There were some solitary figures sitting closer to the back. I gazed into one of the mirrors and caught someone's eye, but just as quickly, the eye disappeared, and when I turned around, its owner was gone. I walked

home, bolted the door and drew the blinds. That night Clara did not come home and I slept on the sofa with all the lights on.

A few days later, in what must have been the middle of November, towards the end of a term which had seen almost no official tuition as a result of the students' continuing encroachment on the university buildings, the ice set in decisively and for the duration. I began altering the course of my daily walks. I would advance in small shuffling steps on the ice-bound pavement up behind the university to where the central smokestack billowed great puffs of white and grey. In the mornings, the cold, distant glitter of the sun hit the enormous pipe, and I was mesmerised, an exquisite and terrible disorientation seized me day after day. I felt the smokestack represented or actually was a place where two celestial and immanent forces met, the smokestack a fold in the fabric of the world, standing stark against the white winter sky, a fact as scorned as it was immovable, rising out of the land on the edge of campus, on the other side of which unfolded the east end of the city, a place I had never been and in all likelihood would not be able to find my way out of were I suddenly deposited there. This section of the campus had been paved over and was surrounded by chain-link fencing. Only once did I ever encounter anyone up there, as I made my rounds one Friday morning, following my breath around the empty lot. I saw a woman standing still, smoking and gazing through the fence at something beyond. For a long time she did not turn around even though my steps on the snow made that high, horrible polystyrene sound I associated with cloudless winter days, a low and sharp sun. It was to be sure the coldest day of the year, with the wind chill even colder, the weatherman had been in ecstasy when he announced the forecasted temperature, the lowest on the centigrade scale since he had been in the post. He had delightedly let slip on television earlier that morning a warning of frostbite, the result of a high pressure system due to roil over the city for the foreseeable future, bringing high winds which already tumbled over the streets unimpeded, transforming the city into a howling tundra. Even in spite of all this, the woman who stood facing the chain-link fence wore no gloves as she raised a red and chapped hand to her face and puffed away at a cigarette. She turned her head slightly. It was Clara who stood there smoking, Clara whom I had not seen for a matter of days, and who now appeared before me staring out beyond the chain-link fence on the periphery of the campus, who had not reacted in the slightest to the sound of footsteps in the vicinity, who stood gripping the

fence with her left hand as if frozen, and whom I found myself completely unable to approach. I watched her standing there, and I understood that the scene signified something, a warning. It came in like a rushing noise.

Not all of our forebears have favoured a better lot for their successors. One similarly did not always wish one's contemporaries well. Scarcity being the only available logic, one's difficulty begot another's. It was a cruelty cultivated long ago and refined in the intervening years, expressed in the organisation of everyday life. I knew this, and yet in spite of this knowledge I still behaved as though it were possible to have a singular relationship with the world, with the people in it. Everything was shot through with these ghostly existences, these structuring discourses that made mutual understanding impossible, that refused so much in advance. In this dissonance, one wished one's loved ones ill, I for one wished them ill, at the same time as one wished them only the best, wished them only to share in the wealth and bounty of the world.

It was with a vague feeling of disgrace that on a Friday night at the end of December I asked Clara to meet me in a bar. She had not been at the cottage for a matter of weeks, and though I wondered where she was staying, she had not volunteered the information and so I had not asked. Having extended the invitation I felt on the back foot, worried that I had violated some unspoken arrangement of ours. We were both, as she had once said, accustomed to staking out the perimeter of our days, or in any case we ought to be, she added at a certain point, if there was anything she could not bear it was people making demands on her, and so we must divest ourselves of any vestiges of dependency. I felt proud that she entrusted me with this dictum, and so explicitly, too, it was clear she had faith in me to carry it out, perhaps even regarded me as an equal. In bed the night before, I had been reading, in an effort to retrain my mind in habits of thinking, a collection of essays. According to the author of these essays, the job of the writer was to tell the truth, to depict the sometimes good but mostly monstrous realities of the world as it was. The thing is, she wrote, sometimes telling the truth did not further justice. Sometimes, in fact, advancing the cause of justice meant suppressing a whole lot of the truth, according to this writer. I had a habit of arriving far too early for appointments, and I typically filled the time, depending on the context, by reading or smoking or otherwise engaging in an activity that made me appear occupied. Here I say occupied when what I mean is unavailable, since it is in fact the availability of my person that is of relevance. So I mulled this essay over, reread bits of it, as I sat at the bar, waiting for Clara, nursing my drink. It is true that in those days the concept of truth was by and large and obviously irrelevant, the mechanisms of power had been laid bare, the papers confusing balance for objectivity: the dog whistle, the wink and nod, the tacit injunction to permit the impermissible, accept the unacceptable, even the charlatans surprised at the amount of airtime they were getting. What would it mean to tell the truth in such conditions? I wanted to talk to Clara about these ideas, but when she arrived, bringing in the smell of frost, something in her attitude prevented me from discussing my findings. Clara was composed, I really believe she did not notice any change in my bearing towards her, my eagerness to drink up her presence, she was cool. I cannot now recall what we discussed, perhaps it was to do with end-of-term assessment, or films we had seen

separately or together, or even newly discovered recipes for soup, of which we were both avid consumers, a fact not at all surprising when one considers the ease with which it can be made and stored in large quantities, minimising the amount of time spent procuring ingredients, chopping, slicing, sautéing, puréeing, boiling or leaving them to simmer. This need for expediency made sense for Clara: she had more time to work if she could feed herself out of microwaveable containers for weeks on end, but she took care in the initial preparation of the soups. For my part, cooking, and eating itself, were activities in which I engaged joylessly but which I knew were necessary, life-sustaining. I turned on the television as I ate, watching long-syndicated series from the 1990s and fighting the urge to lie down on the living room floor and go to sleep. In fact, I was very proud of this living room. At a certain point I had procured a pale blue rag rug, I had hung voile curtains with a bit of packing twine, and I had even put on the wall certain pictures I had carried with me through the years, none of which Clara had ever commented on. A pencil sketch of a cottage almost hidden by trees, its metal chimney just visible. A series of blue things. At times, however, I hated the cottage so thoroughly I could barely go into the bathroom with its makeshift skirting or ancient, rusting shower stall, or into the bedroom whose walls badly needing painting – marked as they were with grease spots from the Blu-tack the previous inhabitants had used to adhere ultrasound printouts which showed, in stages, the growth of the foetus they had produced – without feeling a profound sadness and disgust. And so when Clara arrived that night we did not, as I had intended, discuss any of the things I had been reading about, we did not discuss her absence, of which she herself seemed incognisant, but instead something commonplace, which was just as well because the state of intellectual hyperactivity in which Clara seemed to live sometimes made me anxious. We had drinks, occasionally leaving them at the bar, covered with napkins, so that we could stand outside and smoke. Various men looked at us; some approached, making their opening gambits before trailing off, confused. Sometimes Clara would smile at these men; at other times she would look away. I maintained an impassive attitude throughout. Men liked Clara, whereas my relations with them were marked by and large by resentment. When men approached the two of us together I could see the mechanisms of their brains whirring behind their eyes, calculating, calculating. Clara could predict and even control the outcome. She had the capacity to make herself

very soft. There was nothing, on the other hand, that mitigated the fact of my presence in a room. I was solid, sharp-angled, unmoving. If I could be said to be attractive, I was equally, if not to a greater degree, frightening. The missives from the man who left me before Christmas suggested that there was a dreadful precision to my words and, what was more, to my appearance. Life, he said, ran through me with a sound like teeth against steel. Clara knew about pleasure. She knew about so very many things I did not. I left her to it. So you see.

She had woken up, she said, in the spare room with no recollection of coming home. Her head like a great, heavy moon, and hot. Between her legs she ached. Her insides ached. She had spent so many years in anticipation of this moment, waiting for this terrible awakening, and here it was at last on a morning in late December.

Before obtaining my job at the university, I sometimes had cause to travel by train to attend interviews at institutions in various far-flung locations, in leafy old towns or shiny post-war cities, in grey erstwhile centres of modern industry or else in grey erstwhile centres of modern culture. On one of these trips I was riding a commuter train to an unfamiliar town. It was morning. We crossed a series of flat or rolling places. We passed cows in the mist, seagulls on a football pitch, a limestone quarry. Rain. I felt weightless. The train sounded its horn and strained a little as though it were fixing to slow down. A small boy with freckles and buggy eyes was seated across from me. He turned towards the front of the train and said, Are there people on the line? I recognised that look on his face. The truth is that sometimes we just want the worst to happen.

What is the difference between repetition and insistence? Listen: the truth is that we sometimes want the worst to happen. In this life one quickly learns what to expect, what is to come. What happened to Clara, I told myself, was an inevitable rite of passage. Things happen, one sees for instance a horse for the first time, driven by its rider, a police officer, into a crowd, for the first time one is touched on the nape of the neck, or there, or there. For a long time nothing happens, though one might intend to go someplace, nothing happens and still one knows there are things to come. One cannot help but wonder if we will ever be revenged.

For days Clara moved through the cottage as though she were a creature crawling to the hard shoulder politely to die at the edge of the road. Barefoot, she went from one room to the next writing in a notebook. I could not look at her. When she retired to her bedroom, I left a flask of tea in the doorway. One morning I found the notebook open. Take care of the body as implement. Should we? That is, should we tell the truth, even when we ourselves cannot bear it? I began spending as much time as possible in my office, travelling to the university on the slightest pretence. I did not want to think about what had happened to Clara. I did not want to think about what had happened. I did not want to think that what had happened to me could happen to her, whose inviolability had seemed preserved somehow even through marriage, a series of affairs, did not want to think that something had touched that spare and blameless centre. Up until now I had conceived of Clara purely in the abstract, barely as a body, and I was disappointed and angry at this sudden eruption of the flesh in our lives. One pursued the life of the mind only to find one's own face pressed up against the looking glass. The promised enlightenment was always just out of reach, the brute fact of our bodies reminding us we would always only be seen as women, reminding us that the universal was not universal and that transcendence was not for us. We had been making recourse to the same orders of thought that had undone us and would continue to undo us always. In what happened to Clara I learned that sometimes to know things is to hurt. There was no sense of surprise. Our turning towards each other, the filaments of desire, the nature of which we did not need to ponder, might be best understood as an orientation towards an ideal, and it is for that very reason that the whole enterprise suggested devastation from the start. It contained within it the seeds that made its own realisation impossible. For Clara had signs of ruin about her, and of course, what we despise, we are. I understood even then the principles underpinning the way I acted after what happened to Clara, principles that originated in feelings like but not limited to, feelings constellating around, the desire for vengeance. Yes, I knew even then the terrible impulses and motions of the spirit that were driving me, even if I could not quite locate the precise object of these movements. To be able to explain how I acted would be to explain all the intricacies of my relationship with Clara, it would in fact require an elaboration of the whole

history of ideas like desire and loathing, domination and surrender, a task as ill-fated as it was essential. It was not fair. As one poet wrote, at this sour end of our century, how much is out there. How far we fall short.

And because of this, some time passed before Clara spoke to me again. She had been working, she said, a new idea. I smiled at her. Yes, she said, looking at me, a smiler with the knife. What she was suffering from, she said, might be described as a sickness of contact. All my diffidence, she said, my essential meekness, had been only an elaborate performance. What was more, she said to me as I leaned against the wall in the hallway, was that I had, and she knew it, only ever wanted the worst to happen. Here was the truth: the truth was she blamed me. It did not have to be this way, she said. I did not have to be this way, Clara said, nearly breathless. I considered this. Had I enabled, even caused what had happened to happen? Had I brought it into being? If not in fact at least in theory, yes, I saw now that I had worn her down, our months together had caused her to forget the terrible fact of her body in the world and so she had lowered her guard. Perhaps even for a moment I had willed it. Sometimes we will the darkness into being because the anticipation is a thing much more terrible, and I knew that we both had apprehended even in girlhood the bad days to come. It seemed now that there had been a misapprehension somewhere, some crucial principle transgressed in one's failure to attend to it. I had told her too much, or not enough, I had not listened, had spoken at cross purposes, had been at fault. And I had let her down. I had looked to her for so long that it had not once occurred to me that she was looking back. Although we lived together I was sure she was barely aware of my existence, but in fact she had loved me in her way and I had harmed her, yes, in ways of my own, difficult to pinpoint, I had harmed her. I had let her down. I had wanted the truth and yet failed to recognise the truth or any one of its correlates at every turn. But who was it who said the truth is the prerogative of a society which coerces its members to own up the better to hunt them down? The vital thing is not to let anybody get to the bottom of you: had I not said that myself? Had I not recited it like a maxim in moments of vulnerability? I had been culpable. How little it took to move from one to the other. It was a question of language, of one thing leading to the next. I had always struggled with the logic of sequence. Why this turning in on yourself, Clara had said. Why all this flapping of wings? What was the use of this constant self-examination, what in fact was the use of the truth? What use could it possibly have, Clara said, and although her voice remained even and quiet,

it was as though she were screaming. The distance between us was as small as it had been that day in the snow, and yet there was no step I could take that would lessen it. I could not help her. She looked at me again and said: I had thought that we could still talk to each other, you and I, but it turns out that this world severs everything tender. We try to communicate, without hesitation, without digression or justification. But all this means is that life has succeeded in duping us, in pulling the wool over our eyes, in making us believe that there is anything possible besides a terrible silence. I see now, she continued, the complicity that enfolds us all, all of us who, when confronted with the unbearable events that comprise today's history, think of ourselves at all. I'm sorry, I said. Clara, I said. But she looked at me in a way that suggested I did not understand what she was saying, not at all.

Within the department, discussion continued to turn upon the weather. Without explanation, a curfew had been instituted for the municipality. The mayor appeared on television, standing on a podium and surrounded by a group of people in dark suits. He was overheard to say, Everything is under control. It was curious the way his assertion, his very presence in fact on the podium, suggested quite the opposite, even if the specifics of the disorder in which the city found itself were not widely communicated. It occurred to me, fleetingly, that the mayor himself was perhaps at the root of the trouble, whatever it was, an amalgamation of things it seemed, nothing was ever proved, everything remained simmering under the surface, as far as the public was concerned, nothing actually happened. In short, I could make little sense of the conditions under which I lived and worked, combining as they did the trivial and the terrifying. I had cause to think these things were in any case two sides of the same so to speak coin. When we probed underneath everyday life, when we pressed on to the other side of the ordinary, did we not after all conclude that boredom was a form of anxiety, if not of sheer terror? When one acted out of boredom, it was in an effort to forestall the worst taking one by surprise. The terrors of life, after all, were not limited to the contingencies that existed outside of our own existence. They were also composed of fateful acts that confined one in a life of one's own making. And so, in the grip of this dread of things to come, one mustered up one's courage and confronted head-on the likely outcomes of some imminent and wrenching change, dimly imagined. In short one found a way to will this change into being before its time. One sought a life on one's own terms, forced a confrontation, met the darkness, the darkness which one could not read, however hard one tried, but in doing so, also brought that darkness to life. I understood the anonymous notes I had been receiving as part of the circumstances of my life then, one of many events and occurrences to which I was subject but over which I had little power and which were, moreover, not directed at me precisely but actually impersonal in character, generalised. There was little one could do in the face of these mysterious occurrences but to endure. But where was Clara? The day of our exchange I had left the cottage and, when I returned, found it empty. I had not seen her since.

In a ten-minute consultation with a general practitioner one could obtain, I learned, not only a prescription for fluoxetine but also diazepam and even, if one played one's cards right, an opioid medication such as but not limited to oxycodone, hydrocodone or fentanyl. The doctor who saw me was heavily pregnant and observed me coolly as I described my symptoms. She explained, as she wrote out my script, that she did not want to see me again for another six weeks, although, she added, it was true that by that time she would be on leave for at least a year and someone else would be taking up my case. In effect, she said, we prescribe these drugs so readily because there is nothing else for us to do. At first she had been motivated by a feeling of public-spiritedness, a feeling that in handing out the medication she was, at least, taking some action on behalf of her patients. This inspiration had worn away with time; with the sheer volume of patients she saw on behalf of the practice each week, she could not recognise any one of us, our faces were a blur to her. But she continued, she said, to write these prescriptions partly out of habit, and partly out of a sense of mischievousness. In fact, she admitted, the whole situation had evolved into a kind of diversion for the doctors. Since it was unlikely any single patient would see the same doctor more than once in a sequence, they took it upon themselves to play pranks, via the patients, on one another, so that what one recommended, another would absolutely prohibit. Patients came into the office one month for a prescription that was unlikely to be renewed by another doctor the next. She watched me closely, and I wondered what she saw reflected in my expression. What are our crimes, she said, pressing her hand to her belly, compared to those committed against us?

Please forgive me.

I was not born with an instinct for pleasure.

As swiftly as the students had seized control of the campus, so all of a sudden the normal activities of the university resumed, a new term was under way, and no reference was made to the nearly two-month-long interruption. I found myself one morning in early February cutting across the park at lunchtime. A woman on a bicycle rode slowly past me on the path. She was stout, and although she pedalled so slowly it seemed unbelievable to me that the bicycle should remain upright, she had an air of implacability. That is a person, I thought, who insists upon her right to be in the world. She moves slowly but steadily on. She walks into the canteen at the office, I thought, and sits at a table eating lunch, which she has packed away even now in her saddlebag. She is a person, above all, who installs rear-view mirrors on the handlebars of her bicycle. I experienced this woman as a threat to my very existence. As she went by she seemed to take on a solidity, while I at the same time felt as though I were fading rapidly; she, accumulating density, and I, splitting into atoms, being dashed upon the wind. I was overcome with the desire to reach out and push her over. What would it take, after all. A nudge. I began to fantasise with some regularity about this as I watched cyclists weave through traffic. What power merely to reach out, and push. I was pondering this as I unlocked the door to my office one morning. I sat down at my desk, and, about to shift a large quantity of student essays in an effort to find my reading glasses, for my eyesight had begun to deteriorate since taking on the post, I noticed an unfamiliar object. The object, although difficult to discern at first in the gloom of my office, unscheduled power outages being routine at that time, turned out to be a stone, of neutral colour and irregular shape, something one might idly pick up and then immediately discard as one walked on the beach, and underneath this stone was a small piece of paper.

So many lives one's single life contains.

I was walking along the road that led to the city centre. It was a high road, from which one could see, to the west, the crags of the hill near my cottage and, to the south, a range of higher hills, often in snow. On the right was a hedge that ran the length of the road, from its easternmost point to its westernmost. The morning was cold, although it must have been early spring, because the gorse was starting to flower in the ravine and on the side of the hill. People struggled up the crags underneath a grey sky. Gulls circled overhead. A man was walking beside the hedge on the pavement opposite. At intervals he stopped, inserted into the hedge his arm up to the elbow, and pulled out a handful of litter. He leaned over and placed the pile carefully onto the kerb. On and on he went. The wind started to rise and with it, the litter, which appeared to be composed exclusively of small squares of paper. The man went on stopping, inserting, pulling out, bending over. The wind carried the paper into the street and across into the ravine to my left. I could see now that they were pieces of foil, even, identical, perfectly square. There was something definitive in the man's actions at the same time as they remained perfectly mysterious. I felt that this act, of pulling the litter out, placing it down and having it fly away, was meaningful in a way that my own behaviour was not. The action was being carried out according to some secret logic that, although indecipherable to me, retained its integrity. As I walked into the city, I felt keenly that my life to that point had been comprised of a series of failures, each more catastrophic than the last. This man, with his squares of kitchen foil, had thrown into relief the abortive aspects of the human adventure as I had been living it. One tried in vain to move beyond the misfortune of one's childhood, of having been a grim child. Instead one spent one's life desiring absolutely and forever the revelation of a moment. What did it mean, the cup falling from a hand and smashing to pieces in the garden, in May, a million years ago? All this time I had been searching for an answer to a question that felt meaningful but whose outlines were in fact poorly defined. It was connected somehow to this time of year. What was it, that feeling that came with the spring? Wherever I was, standing on a street corner, waiting for the bus, coming out of the metro: there. A slow shock of cold crept up my scalp, spread across my chest. It was a feeling like

standing on a cliff edge and knowing it was possible to jump. At any moment, one might jump. One might take off.

In amongst the other gestures of springtime came the realisation that the new year had been full of omens. First, walking in the long, blue January dusk, I had seen on the pavement the bottom half of a pigeon, emptied of its insides, scooped clean like an eggshell. Then, just as the snowdrops began to bloom in the neighbour's garden, I saw a magpie at the birdbath. The bird struck and struck at its reflection in the water, bloodying its beak. Finally, as I rode the intercity bus into work, the trains having been cut off, at last, by extensive flooding, I saw through the window a dead fawn on the roadside, legs stiffened to the sky. Yes, there had been omens, occurrences so laden with possible significance that any act of interpretation would be futile. We hedge our bets, in any case. We do not want to give too much away. As I lay in bed on weekend mornings, exhausted, I watched the tops of the trees swaying in the street. The sound and the movement of the branches against the sky mottled with cloud filled me with a dread that was matched only by an overwhelming desire to stand outside in my nightdress and feel the wind against my skin.

On one of these weekend mornings, I went out for a walk. I headed in the direction of the park in the middle of which stood the high hill it was my custom to climb. I walked and walked, picking up pace, until I found myself winded and standing at the very top. All was still. Although it was a warm Sunday, the sun winking out from the clouds, all was still. There was something singular about the light in this part of the country. One got used to a certain climate, a quality of light, the way it cast shadows in the evening. Here one forgot about shadows. Clouds hung low over the cities, the towns, over the countryside. In the summer evenings, a grey light came groping through the living room window: not long and blue but grainy, a light with texture and heft. Darkness hung in the corners of the room. In the park the sun had been out, but as I stood at the top of the hill, the mist rose from the bay, encircling everything. I could feel the movement of the air around me, the moisture being pulled up and up by the sun, as though it were a net and I its prey. I could see only the grass around my feet, beading with dew. I stayed still. I heard small movements on the other side of the mist, the snuffling of an animal, or the shuffling of a foot against the tall wet grass. The sun pressed through the mist, sending out diffuse rays, making halos around dark and indiscernible shapes. The day seemed all at once an unbearable burden, the beauty of which I could not face up to. The noises on the other side of the mist subsided, and gradually the mist itself dissipated, revealing the bay, glittering bright blue in the sun. Some days, I thought, as I regarded the environs, regarded the hillside blooming yellow with gorse, regarded the warm wind tossing the branches of the elm trees in the park below, I was overcome. I was filled up by this beauty, and I was laid low. Clara's mobile had been cut off and I had not seen her in weeks. I had very little contact with other people now. I hardly ever spoke, unless I was giving a lecture. At times, I could not feel my own body, unless it was to experience a longing that touched down here and there, softly.

During my visit to the analyst's office in the western suburbs, I wondered aloud whether the circumstance of not having seen my own shadow in months had had an effect on my sense of self. The analyst shook her newspaper, an action which pleased me, it reminded me of my childhood, so few people nowadays bothered to take out a subscription to the daily papers, and she began to speak from behind the pages. This would prove difficult to determine, she pointed out, since I had little data documenting my psychic state prior to the diminution of my shadow. It was a problem, she said, of periodisation. When we look back upon our lives, we expect to see, rising behind like monuments to the war dead, events of significance to us, milestones, rites of passage. But when we seek to place a specific event in time with any accuracy, what we find, she went on, is that our life resembles a flat brown field under a flat grey sky, both going on for miles and miles and touching the horizon. Perhaps it was having some kind of effect on my identity, perhaps not, who was she to say, said the analyst. All the same, as a proposition it seemed to her an improvement on my agonising self-awareness, that feeling of being conspicuous which had often proved such a hindrance to my moving through the world. Think of it, she said, as a happy death, a little disappearance. Think of it as a state of being in which your atoms are less closely bonded but which is not quite, you understand, invisibility. Presence and absence sitting alongside one another. I might like to keep a journal, she continued, a way of marking time, of noting down the daily occurrences, occurrences which would have no interest to anyone other than myself. Today, for instance, should I find it to be the case, I might write down, in a notebook set aside for this purpose, No shadow all day, or else, Partial shadow at lunchtime, two fingers and a sleeve, or even, Hair conceivably lighter. Who knew what changes I might observe in myself if I paid close enough attention. Why after all fight the inevitable, and anyway why not help it along.

After a time I found that my body, to which on the whole and for most of my life I had barely given a second thought, was beginning to twinge in unexpected places. I woke in the morning not in pain, exactly, but in a state of bodily awareness that was entirely new. Although I continued to walk around the city and its outskirts on a daily basis, it was with a feeling that my legs would give out at any moment, my muscles cease to work, that little by little, the prickle I had noticed in my fingertips would resolve into a numbness that by and by would spread through my nervous system until I was rendered completely insensate. Each time I stood at the top of a flight of stairs, preparing to descend, I imagined my collapse, legs crumpling beneath me, my dead weight propelling me fleshily down flight after flight, blood pooling at one end of my skin and then the other as my body folded and folded over itself. The feeling came over me also, at dusk, waiting for the bus home, standing near the kerb surrounded by people, so little between any of us and the oncoming buses that pulled in and out of the station constantly if not always on time. I wondered what it was holding any of us back. If I fell, was it that I had been pushed or only that I had allowed myself to give in to the multiple collisions that make up life and oneself, reminding us of our body's surfaces, its essential and complete separateness. At times I could see just behind the knife-like smiles the men at the bus stop directed at me, and I hated them. All the same their ill will, as well as my own, came from somewhere, perhaps had even originated with me, with my showing up in the same place day after day, refusing to vary my routine in the slightest even in spite of the common wisdom voiced daily by the news media, or one's family, or one's friends, my very presence at the bus stop at the same time each day amounting to an expression of derision and disgust for these men who shuffled about, pathetic in their coats, ridiculous in their posture, I felt all of this, the old saying that the word for a group of men was a threat and that my contempt would kill me. Some evenings I inched closer and closer to the men who stood nearest to the edge. What after all was holding any of us back.

One day at lunchtime I wandered into a café by the university. The water levels had receded and, for the time being, the mayor's office had lifted the curfew. People went out in the evenings, smelling the fragrant air. It was April, and the wind blew up the leaves in the nearby park. The person working the till seemed to me familiar, though I could not place him with any certainty. Had he been one of my students? The conjugal partner of one of my colleagues? Someone I encountered regularly at the municipal swimming pool? Was he perhaps a man I had met on an online dating website? Had I had drinks with this man who stood now behind the counter, wearing a kind of smock, on the front of which was stitched the name of the café? Was it possible I had been inside this man's apartment, perhaps even in his bed? Had I in fact had sex with this man? I had come into the café to buy a portion of soup, usually served with two slices of bread, one brown and one rye, since my will to plan lunches had faltered, and I rarely had any food in the cottage except porridge and, at last reckoning, a bag of sesame seeds, which I could not remember purchasing, nor could I work out what kind of meal I might at one point have been planning that would have required their addition. But the bag was open and no longer full, so I must have at least once in my culinary attempts found the sesame seeds necessary to the completion of a recipe. I looked in the display case at the sandwiches sweating on their plates and felt disgusted. Although these sandwiches were considered to be gourmet, insofar as one could apply the word to any eating establishment in the city, and although some seemed even to contain fresh figs and blue cheese, still I felt disgusted. I ordered a pea soup and dropped the quantity of change I was holding in my fist onto the floor, which action made not only a loud noise but also a protracted one, as the coins, finding nothing to stop them, rolled and rolled in any and all directions through the café. I felt dejected and ashamed and wanted nothing more than to run outside, since I could not at all envision myself chasing the coins to the furthest reaches of the café, where they had come to rest against walls, or feet, or bags, or prams, but I felt at the same time a sense of responsibility towards the man working the till, out of whose pay cheque the money for the soup, if I ran off, might come, and whose pay was, what was more, minimum wage at most, whereas my wages were higher since the union, whose power was daily attenuated by the point-blank refusal of

the university to engage with its demands, a refusal supported by local and state governments, had nonetheless managed somehow to secure a few negligible pay rises in the previous ten years. I was in a situation which felt insoluble, and I froze. At that moment, I found Clara was standing next to me. She explained that she had watched my progress through the park from the bench she had been sitting on. I thought it likely, she said, that you would end up here, being unable in the main to plan meals ahead of time, still less to execute them. Clara had a way of telling one the truths about oneself, as though not to do so would be to encourage in oneself a terrible sense of well-being. She paid for my soup and ushered me to a seat by the window. She made no mention of her months-long absence, neither where she had been, or with whom, or indeed why she had gone away. She was wearing clothing I had never seen on her before, a bright red turtleneck and patterned harem trousers. She had cut her hair short. I would not have recognised her were it not for that brusqueness that was so characteristic of her. We sat gazing in silence through the window. I was keenly aware of the negative space between our bodies, seated on separate stools, a foot or so apart. It hummed. Again I found myself at a loss. Did I ever feel, said Clara suddenly, as though one's life was characterised by a general paralysis of will? It was true, she continued, that the abiding feeling in the city at the time was one of paranoia, true that we built each other up only to lay one another low again at the earliest opportunity. It was true, moreover, that one might be better off committing suicide. And yet instead of committing suicide, one went to work. And why did I think that was, asked Clara. Why was it, she said, lifting her mug of tea to her lips, that we went on and on, when it was precisely this going on and on that should fill us with terror. We carried on as normal until one day, well into our lives, we woke up with a worm in the heart. What followed was a succession of moments when we found we'd had enough of our relationship to the world. We found we'd had enough. We found, in fact, said Clara, that we felt more or less the same as usual, which was to say, terror-stricken. Terror all along. Clara looked at me directly now: But how various the ways of looking away. I found it difficult to respond to this gnomic utterance, whose meaning I would not have been able to paraphrase even though I understood it completely. It was an opening and also an invitation from someone who was unaccustomed to receiving. It was a way of telling me, I think now, that I had meant something to her, even perhaps that she needed me. I could not say a thing.

I wanted her to lean into me, but as ever I struggled to soften my body's angularity. I wanted to be open but I held myself still. I wanted to reach out. Like so many things it was impossible. We went on sitting in silence. There had been much silence, I thought, looking at Clara's reflection in the window. What was it that I wanted to say to her? It had to do with life, the great gashes in the world. It was not that one wanted to guard it jealously, to cleave it together and to oneself. Rather, one simply did not want it to be torn apart. One loved it all, and with so much pain. She caught my eye in the reflection of the window, and I felt somehow that she too understood.

It was early, the sun had not yet risen. My certainty of the previous day had evaporated as I sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Was it a truce that Clara had offered in the café? I felt like a sore, licked and licked open. That old failure, the old disappointment at not understanding and not being understood. What had she actually said? Avoid generalisations, I said to my students day after day. Support your claims, I pleaded, with specific examples from the text. Start with the particular. On the other hand, as I well knew, one saw after all the patterns hidden behind ordinary occurrences, one was often overwhelmed by them. Like the familiar feeling of panic that settled the first time one slept beside a man, the silences that throbbed in the space between. But then again it was a man who said that to interpret silence as delay, to refuse to see that sometimes there is nothing to say, would be tragic.

For a while I had suspected Clara of having reconciled with her husband the Chair, who in turn had materialised in the department after his extended absence. He was magnanimous for a stretch of time, issuing furloughs from administrative duties to his favourites, promising an improved workload model, and providing on his own initiative additional cases of wine at the Wednesday seminars. For a man who had never before shown evidence of any leadership qualities, he appeared conscious all at once that certain duties, long left undone, might have been expected of him, and instead of taking these on in silence, he initiated an apology tour that took him around the department, appearing unbidden in each of our doorways, soliciting indulgences from one member of the faculty after another and lingering over our desks until he received his due expiation. I understood that their marriage afforded Clara certain protections – from the point of view of a social life, there was the usual run of dinner parties and drinks, the expected conversations and affairs everyone knew about but which never resulted in scandal, they were after all part of the right set, certain transgressions were expected; from a fiscal perspective, he had come up in another time, would never now lose his Chair, and in any case had a certain amount of inherited wealth in the form of property, had a portfolio of some kind, made canny investments. In a formal sense, exactly half of this security now belonged to Clara, but it was not about the money, not really, nor the respectability, although either would have been easy enough to understand given her irregular upbringing. In truth it was easy to follow what Clara saw in him: briefly, he was a man who did not understand anything and would not try to, he would not ask questions, would leave her alone. That is what he could offer, and it was no small thing: he would let her be.

In an essay I had been reading instead of Celan, with whose work I was still for better or for worse and by and large unacquainted, the author advanced the argument that the problem with Hamlet, as a play, was that the actions of Hamlet, the man, were governed by a series of emotions which were in excess of their causes. Even if it were the case that Hamlet's problems – his mother sleeping with his uncle who murdered his father, his father's ghost making night-time visits to Elsinore, Ophelia drowning herself in the river – did not merit the emotional response shown by him – even if this were the case, the fact was, it occurred to me one day as I sat in my office eating my cheese sandwich, that grief, in excess of its object, can still kill you. But, I thought, chewing and swallowing, who has time for Hamlet. Another blue boy. Hamlet's grief, Keats's devils, Freud's melancholy, Adorno's resignation, all required reading at some point during my university career, had men not been using their sadness indiscriminately and forever. Men who pursued affliction with tears in their eyes, who said, please, won't you purify me a little. And what about an approach to suffering that did not depend on claiming to feel on someone else's behalf? Is that not what Clara had been getting at? That one ought to be suspicious of the satisfactions of empathy, its moral vanity, in other words, that one must recognise that feelings obliterate thought and disable us from confronting, directly and concretely, the scale of suffering without becoming overwhelmed by it? One should aspire rather to a state of gravity and grace. If one could only do that, I felt, crumpling my sandwich bag and tossing it into the bin, one might see clearly. Tread the ground between sacralisation and indifference. Had all my ideas been Clara's first? I had, I felt, been interested in exploring an ethic of detachment for as long as I could remember, longer anyway than I had known Clara. I had even organised my life in certain ways so as to make space for reserve and containment, and I had done this in part due to the way things were, one's failure to face up to the disasters of the present day, to face the world in all its wretchedness. And yet I had an uncanny feeling that my thoughts marched on along a road mapped out long ago. Again, I was unsettled by these ghosts of repetition.

I woke with the sensation that the cottage had been broken into. A fire was burning low in the wood stove and the wind was blowing in the curtains from the open window. I went through the house room by room, taking detailed inventory of my belongings. As far as I could tell, nothing had been removed, nothing had been touched, no one had been inside. The only sound was of the rain, which had started up again. I turned on the television to the local news, which was as usual taking stock of the damage caused by the floods. They were showing footage of a lovely gabled house, mint green, going up in flames in the city centre as water swirled around it. One could see the flames reflected in the water. The sound of someone playing piano scales came through the window.

I watched from the kitchen window as the next-door neighbour stood in front of the house opposite, wearing striped green pyjamas and slippers that slid ever so slightly on the ground, slick with dew. After a moment he began to move slowly to the edge of one of the neighbours' gardens. I saw that he carried a spade in his left hand and, in his right, a cigarette whose smoke looped upwards in the morning air. He stood still, and stood still, and all at once began to dig feverishly in our neighbour's low shrubbery. With one hand he dug, with the other, pulled and pulled on the shrub. I could hear the deep rending noise of the roots in the ground, of earthworms being pulled apart, finally a creaking sound of the plant giving way. Now he held the shrub in his right hand, the spade in his left, and slowly he began to walk down the narrow street to the main road. As I watched him go by, someone else's shrub in one hand, shedding someone else's soil in a straight line as he went, I thought: Yes. I know what it is to want to act without first seeking permission. When the odds were so clearly not in one's favour, what was left to do but thief? To take something for one's own. Something that was not shabby, worn out, run down, something trimmed and treated, like one's neighbour's shrub. What in the end did they add up to, these moments of revelation? The neighbour and I had never spoken, would never now speak to each other. And Clara – that intensity between us that I could not articulate seemed to have run its course, too. What, now, was I supposed to do with its residues? Still I was held fast. What would I do? I would strip the world bare. I would start over.

During the time we lived together, I ran into her once, unexpectedly, sitting in a pub with a group of people. She was barely recognisable in this context. It was my usual haunt, I had stopped in on the way home from a walk. I had never seen her so sociable and at the same time so inaccessible. I sat at the bar with my back to her and listened as she went on without pause for an hour and thirty minutes, discoursing upon Martin Luther and John Milton. Every so often and without warning she began expounding on current events, one moment decrying the housing crisis and the next excoriating foreign investment in Cuba. She spoke relentlessly, filling the space in front of her so full I was sure she could not see me, and yet at times I was convinced she was speaking directly and only to me, that the people who surrounded her, unknown to me, were just as unknown and indeed irrelevant to her. I remembered the stunned silence that used to sit between us, or upon us, or in any case seemed to surround us with such immensity, with such heaviness, that it rendered me completely immobile. The nature of the situation was such that it had caused the existing organisation of my life before to become finally untenable. It was like standing still as a great wind tore the roofs off the city. But could she have been that to someone else? What was absolute was not necessarily unconditional, I knew that now. Clara baited the stars – she was, like them, bright and intermittent.

It was July. I had gone swimming. I was in distress on the lake. The situation being what it was, I allowed myself to admit I had at times appreciated the summer days. I had enjoyed watching the flock of ducklings diminish one by one, picked off at the shoreline by foxes. I had listened to the muskrat snarling in the woodpile, to the mice choking on poison behind the walls. I had loved this world, awfully. All the same and in truth I behaved badly. I had appetites. I stalked through the house at night, seeking high and low the petrol can, seeking high and low the last act, thinking all the while, Would no one tumble over the banisters, saying to themselves in a last flash: All this is no suffering. For what were we to our loved ones if not obstacles in a lifelong struggle to pretend we were otherwise. I had always known what I wanted. I wanted catastrophe. I cannot have been the only one.

Things move in and out of focus. It was a new academic year. I walked through the city feeling poignant. Meanwhile, the floods. Meanwhile, the forest fires. It was as though I felt ennobled by the suffering of my loved ones, it was tedious. The negotiation of the personal in this age of disaster. Nothing had changed, I for one had not changed, I continued doing nothing. I went to work. I grew soft, like a peach. The days had expanded and now again they contracted, I felt that if only it would warm up a bit, I would feel better. At work, we discussed the weather, we maligned the students, we kowtowed to the administration. We did what we felt we had to in order to survive. The extent to which I participated in any of these activities was immaterial, I did nothing to stop them, I stood at the window of my office, I ate my cheese sandwich. The trivial and the terrifying. So what was the nature of this guilt? This quiet complicity, a paralysis of will. No avenues of possibility seemed open. Clara had said, It does not have to be this way. Why then was it? Why was I? At times I thought that what one needed above all was an outside observer so that one could see oneself, reflected back, organised into coherence. In truth the surfaces of the world give nothing up. Clara anyway had given nothing up. But that does not really explain anything. A good thinker. I never could pick a single strain and follow it through. And there it was again, the past, the ineluctable avenue lying behind. It was true that I had never understood why people chose one life and not another, perhaps precisely because I had never had that inclination to look behind me. On the other hand, what had any of this to do with the world? I had no relationship with my own family, let alone a sense of history. As far as possible I had lived my life as if I had appeared from nothing and without warning in any given place. I could not understand why one's life was expected to play out against a background of things that had happened. Nevertheless. One day my father wrote, via email, to say that my mother, from whom he and I had been estranged for many long years, separately and for different reasons, had died, hanging herself from the ceiling beams in her house in the country. My return note bounced back with the suggestion that the email address from which my father had written did not now, or perhaps ever, exist. So that was that. What does that explain? And at what point can one put it all down? I tried that year. I loved

the autumn. I stood in the garden at night looking at the dark branches and thought, yes, this is it. This is what I have always wanted. This obscurity.

I stayed home from the office one morning. I had never up until then taken a sick day, I almost never caught cold or flu, nor had I that day, nonetheless I chose to spend the day at home in my housecoat. I was standing in the garden when the postman arrived, bearing a parcel of some heft, books probably, which needed my signature, so that he was required to stop and talk instead of tossing the post onto the mat from a distance as was his custom. He looked tired. He had been up all night, he said, with his son, who had a long-standing ailment which was sure to kill him, since the only treatment option remaining to them, experimental in nature, was so expensive as to be entirely out of the reach of the postman and his family. When he started in the job, many years ago now, there were still benefits, not to mention pensions. But more than that, he had joined the post office because he respected the institution. From boyhood he had had a romantic idea of delivering the mail in all weathers, fighting the elements in order to convey hoped-for letters and unexpected gifts to people, so many of whom lived alone these days, especially the elderly, but increasingly the young, he said, looking through the open door of my cottage. Wherever he went he was always welcomed, even by people to whom he carried only bills to be paid, even by dogs, that was a harmful myth. The walking kept him healthy and he hoped one day for his son to join him on his mail route, but that seemed increasingly unlikely now, given the boy's poor prognosis. The doctors said if they could only get him to Hungary, something might be done for him. But the unions had been broken, the health service, how could a man of his means afford to fly himself and his son, who would have to be hooked up to an intravenous drip and perhaps even intubated throughout the voyage, how could a man like him afford to leave the country at all? I did not know what to tell him. Everyone in my family was either dead or estranged from me, perhaps even in hiding from the law. Clara was gone. I could not imagine his predicament, I said. Just as I said this one of the neighbours stopped at the garden gate. She was a mean-faced, well-dressed woman, whom I suspected of surreptitiously and perhaps even in the dead of night hacking the crown off the tree that stood in my garden. The tree no longer had any branches to speak of, nor any leaves, had been reduced, for reasons unknown to me, to a smooth grey trunk. The postman looked at the neighbour, and she at him. And then he

fled. She remained standing at the gate for a moment and then slowly adjusted her slouchy, black beanie and proceeded down the street.

At a certain point I must have unpacked the books. I cut and folded the cardboard into smaller pieces, gathered together the packing slips and bits of paper.

There is also, in any history, the buried, the wasted, and the lost.

Around that time I met a man, a colleague in an adjacent department. He spoke to me in the pub one Saturday afternoon. I had been out walking, my cheeks were red from the wind, the fire crackled in the hearth. He spoke, and while he spoke there was silence. In this silence, which was remarkably complete, I wondered what it was that was so moving about headlights at dusk. Why was it that desire was generated by motion, by travelling long distances? And what, in the end, was the difference between desire and grief? Did heaping the remnants of the Goebbels house against a gallery wall really constitute art? (I had caught sight of a story in the newspaper lying on the table between us.) And houses, did they bear the imprints of the people who lived in them, as we carried our homes within us? If one moved to a place where the sun never came out, and one never saw one's own shadow, did it affect one's sense of self? Did other people ever fantasise about reaching into traffic and pushing over a cyclist? Exactly how narrow was the divide between compassion and violence? We sat together for a long while, and I thought, yes, I see. Even a man can contain a world.

This man. He was discreet and intelligent, but above all he was beautiful. People often remarked upon this, his beauty. He had a beautiful mouth and way of standing, a beautiful way of moving and being in the world. He was very kind. He began to invite me places, and I acceded to these invitations, presenting myself at appointed times in specific locations, the cinema, say, or a restaurant. Once or twice we went to the symphony. The others, that is to say, our other colleagues, were not aware of this arrangement as far as I knew, although perhaps they were and simply chose to say nothing, out of either respect or resentment. At first, we never touched. Whether this was because of some aversion on his part or my part, or else due to a lack of interest, or even perhaps because we could not read each other and so skirted the subject of sexual intimacy, skirted each other's bodies like a pair of alley cats, I did not know. In general I felt off-kilter, top-heavy, as though I might keel over backwards at any moment and be crushed under the weight of some object of considerable size. I was profoundly clumsy. Bruises that I had not felt at the time of impact, the precise moment of which I could not in any case remember, covered my body. I frequently forgot what I was doing, or even where I was. While I was still able for the most part to present myself on time, say, to classes, and by and large knew what text I was supposed to be teaching on a given day, it was becoming increasingly difficult for me to understand why I was doing whatever it was that I was doing. In lectures, I would trail off mid-sentence as I attempted to make the connection between what I was saying and why it was relevant. I was not in love, but I was afraid. Again my powers of analysis failed me, I could not make the connection, I simply could not work out how one thing hooked on to the next. I was in despair in advance of anything happening. Things failed to materialise, I knew that. And yet perhaps after all one might make some small intervention in the atmosphere, a penny tossed into the well.

One day we took a walk together, the man and I. He drove us out to the countryside and we walked alongside hedge-rows and fields for a long time. He explained that these were used as lambing fields in spring. The phrase evoked a second one, killing field, and I knew it was better to keep this to myself since the automatic association constituted further evidence, to anyone who was paying attention, that life and death remained basically indistinguishable to me. At last we reached the base of a hill, which I gathered it was his intention to walk up. He told me his family had lived on the same border for centuries, now on one side, now the other, he had grown up in spitting distance of his ancestors, the bog people, in all likelihood. He said that as a result of this history it was important for him to feel grounded in a place. I thought of how desire, in my experience, was propelled by walking and remembered that I had never owned anything, that I grew up in rented apartments high off the ground. I was quiet, but looking out on the day, I wanted the world, the hills, wanted to press them down into me and swallow them, to subdue them.

Clara, I felt, would not have approved of this colleague and the time I spent with him. In fact, I had come to realise that the few people I had contact with, contact which had been in any case limited to other members of the university or else to invited speakers, she had treated with the greatest possible malignance, taking it upon herself to interrogate the basis of their field of study, holding them responsible for the foundation and subsequent development of their particular discipline, a grilling I usually and for the most part enjoyed. But this colleague would have been beyond the pale, as far as she was concerned, I could see her thinking it, beyond the pale, thinking it only because she never said anything about her disdain for the people I surrounded myself with, only drew herself up like a cat, pointing out the basic hypocrisies of whomever it was I had been talking to, the fundamental flaws in their thinking. In the first place the colleague was a robust sort of person, when he was not striding up hills he could be found running marathons or leaping into frigid seas for a vigorous swim, whereas I on the other hand was anything but robust, if anything, and even though I religiously swam lengths in the tepid municipal pool, I was more or less infirm, lethargic, a weakling. But Clara had gone, and I often found myself thinking about those last conversations between us, about complicity and things that cannot be spoken, what one ought to have said but did not because one's courage failed. And then again – how was it acceptable, how could one accept, the legitimacy of one's own feelings in the context of the broken world we all found ourselves in? One did not have a right. One had obligations of other kinds. Was it possible for the sufferings of the self to have a general significance? I seemed to have lost the thread.

I was hanging the washing on the line. Nearby someone played a trumpet, inexpertly. It was the middle of the afternoon, peaceful, late autumn, the sun was out. But it was not my life. Was it my life? There was something menacing behind it all, on the other side of the blue afternoon. That night I met my colleague in a bar. His skin looked soft and smooth. He had worked with animals. I stood up suddenly. He stopped speaking. I looked at his hands, and I wanted to get down on my knees and say, Please, take me somewhere where I can live at the mercy of the weather. And then I was standing in front of the mirror in the women's toilets. I looked more or less like myself. Please, I said. When I returned my colleague had ordered more drinks. He looked the same. He smiled. What, I wanted to say, is the nature of this interaction, is it a question of blame, what about the rule of law, or our future. Are the streets marching off. Has my mind gone off. Will it all come off. Answer me. Do we have to lose everything. He was saying that he had been in an accident, as if to explain something about his behaviour, or his person. Some lasting if not immediately perceptible injury. When the car rolled him down the hill, what had he been thinking of then? Every rotten reflex, decline and suffering. Something tragic no doubt in his past. I touched his cheek and he looked up at me with interest. I was not sure I had spoken a single word. He had a way of carrying sadness like a dead bird in his mouth. His beautiful mouth. I don't want it. Please take it when you go.

For a time things tended towards resolution. The two girls had been found, it was announced – the mayor marched them onto a stage at a press conference, they did not at all look how one expected them to look, no explanation was forthcoming. We had forgotten them by then in any case. Certain restrictions were lifted. The department was in quiet turmoil: accusations of predation and abuse were first made and then suppressed, the official channels through which complaints were handled were circuitous and obscure, and in the end things remained as ever they had been except that the anger coiled more tightly inside some of us, inside our mouths. One knows how these things proceed, the threat of retaliation waiting on the other side of the passageway – it is not a metaphor, it is not a figure of speech. One tries to go about one's life, meagre though it might be, but is forever tailed by the fact of one's body in this untender world. One is reminded, daily, almost hourly, of its imperatives, however much one wishes to forget it – one wants only to be left alone to think, but they would never let us forget for even one second what they thought of us. They had not let me, they had not let Clara. How could one begin to explain this? How was it possible to regard them, not all men but these men, not some men but all men, at all? In short, I had tried to move forward and yet events intervened.

Morning, a broad and empty tree-lined avenue. Another country. The sound was of the leaves pulling over the pavement. I had taken the train to a large city after spending three days in a university town out west participating in a conference whose title had the word light in it, and where one found gathered academics from Europe and the United States, a specific part of Europe and a specific part of the United States – in the case of the latter, the north-east, and in truth, not merely the north-east but more specifically Connecticut, and indeed not just Connecticut but in actual fact the city of Hartford, were Hartfordians or Hartforders or in any case natives of the city of Hartford. Not only, moreover, did these American academics hail one and all from Hartford, but, it transpired, they actually lived within six blocks of one another, at least two of them in the same building, indeed the very same apartment, since it appeared they were married one to the other. Not only did these five academics, these five American academics, live in close proximity to one another but, I discovered, they worked in the same institution, the very same department, and all five of them had adopted, or perhaps were the progenitors of, a certain in-house style, applying the same formula to the arguments they developed, each in his or her own discrete area of expertise. During question periods they were hostile, during breaks, absent, and at the conference dinner, halfway through the soup course, during which they rose as one from the long table and departed, it became clear that not only did they consider the minds of each and every one of the European academics to be utterly degraded, but had found my paper in particular uniquely sickening. To say that I loved them would not be overstating matters, since they were as gods. I had not slept for the entire duration of the conference, precisely three days, being agitated in the run-up to the presentation of my paper, and agitated even more in the run-down. Instead, I continued drinking in my hotel room through the night, watching the television that was affixed to the wall and whose programmes I could not in the least comprehend. Upon the conference's conclusion, I had travelled immediately to this city nearby where I would remain for one night. The city was beautiful and cold, built on a series of islands one could access by foot, by crossing a series of bridges, or else by water via a small and unsteady commuter ferry. It was November and the bare branches scraped the grey sky, out of which the occasional snowflake appeared. I left

my lodgings on Sunday morning and set out, on foot, for the island upon which a theme park had been established, shut down for an unspecified reason, only to be reopened some years later. To tell the truth they were not lodgings that I had left so much as a former lover upon whose couch I had stayed, only it was not on his couch, but in his bed, once it became clear that he expected, in exchange for one night of shelter, remuneration in a very specific form. And so I set out from his home on the Sunday morning, having shared a pot of coffee but stopping short of partaking in a full breakfast, for this so-called fun park island. My walk skirted the edge of the parkland that covered much of the northern end of the city, a parkland that was full of trees, both deciduous and coniferous, comprising species that were native to the area and those that had been introduced since the development, some several hundred years ago, of the city's commerce in trade. The walk took me past the old part of the city into a neighbourhood with broad, tidy avenues, empty except for the occasional piece of litter that tumbled across the pavement in the wind. The Nordic light, hard and cold, fell like a pane of glass on these avenues. I shivered in the breeze. I felt happy. Beside me a car rolled through a red light and struck a cyclist, knocking him off his bicycle and into the road. A line of joggers, which had been proceeding at a steady pace down the avenue, snaked back to where the cyclist lay on his back, in his Lycra, on the ground. The driver had got out of his car and was now standing over the cyclist smoking a cigarette. One of the joggers pulled out a mobile telephone while her companions shouted directions to the precise location. They all jogged in place. The cyclist groaned. It had been such a quiet morning, I reflected, as I moved off from the scene. So quiet that the sound of the impact was singular and self-contained. All in all, I thought, it was curious the way the car, whose make and colour I had already forgotten, in striking the bicycle, sounded not at all like a car striking a bicycle. It was a quiet and clean sound, unobtrusive, followed by a split second's silence before the man and his bicycle hit the ground. The whole scene, I reflected, seemed to have unfolded slowly, lightly, as if it had been choreographed. It was Sunday.

A hard and fleeting frost swept in at the end of the month. The temperature dropped suddenly. There was no wind, no wind at all. Strange how people cease to exist, I thought, looking out onto the trees of the park, all dressed in rime.

I was keeping myself busy. I was avoiding a confrontation of any kind. My colleague and I continued to engage in structured social activities. We looked at and listened to things together – exhibitions, music, movies – the duration of the appointments and the codes of behaviour were meticulously delineated. It was for the best. When he came near me I saw Clara, or myself, or a fourteen-year-old girl in a hospital bed, or the night itself as I listened to a woman's voice on the line. It does not have to be this way, Clara had said, but how could it be otherwise? There were highs, one took a gamble, one occasionally felt giddy when things seemed to go one's way. Still, you lost, most of the time.

I had moved into an office with windows facing onto the park. A man in a bright blue T-shirt sprinted round and round. The clouds lifted off the hills, off to the south. Would I remember this moment? Desire flows where it will, above ground, below ground, filling one up, filling that terrible capacity. Something bitter rises up from the bottom of the fountain. Who was it who called pleasure a bell with a crack? It draws its breath on sufferance and by accident.

One night, after several continuous months of invitations proffered and accepted, my colleague invited me to a dinner party in the city centre. I woke early on the day and cleaned my cottage. I emptied the chest of drawers and folded all my clothing tidily away again. I baked a banana loaf and stood looking out of the window at the frost sparkling on the pavement. As the time neared for him to pick me up, I moved from one side of the cottage to the other, occasionally looking out the window to observe the pattern of clouds in the sky or a small bird landing in the hedge. I was unable to sit down. I watched a magpie through the kitchen window and thought, I had been a grim child. I had buried the crow in the back garden, edging it onto the heavy spade. I had dug a small hole and rolled it in beside a series of other animals discovered in my perambulations. I had been a grim child, and I had never learned how to behave at parties. I felt that a line ran between these two things. The past as an avenue lying behind – now who had said that? Increasingly I was conscious of my own failure to perform adequately at social events. I spent, when amongst other people, such a great deal of time trying to ascertain what precisely any given person thought of me, or how they had received what I said, that I rarely, if ever, had any idea of the content of conversations. I was often aware of having offended other people, although I found it difficult, in spite of my vigilance, to locate the precise moment of offence. I took great care over dressing for dinner, looking in the mirror, smoothing here and there and thinking, hopeless, it's hopeless.

There were a number of people at the dinner party, most of whom were people known to my colleague, some of whom were even, he said, his good friends. There was a variety of different foods served at this event, all of which seemed to be vaguely Persian in inspiration. He sat close beside me, occasionally brushing my arm with his hand, as if by accident. The woman on my left engaged me in conversation about, perhaps, the food, although I found it difficult to follow the thread of her logic. I was aware of my colleague speaking to another man. Look, he said, we are all conscious of just what a catastrophe human history has been. It is true that to date, our narrative has been one of brutality, injustice and wretchedness ... I watched the bubbles hiss to the surface of the soda water in my glass. The host moved from the kitchen to the table, adding dishes and taking still others away. I heard a woman say, Tell him to come see me ... Tea lights flickered and smoked in green cups. A damned unpleasant thing, someone at the other end of the table was saying. And the man across from me in a brown suit, nodding, nodding at a woman who said, And you end up digging these pits ... What was it that it reminded me of? The man nodded and nodded. Yes, yes, he said, pulling apart a fragment of pitta in his hands. Certainly. I tried to pick up the thread of what my colleague was saying. Major reconstruction projects after the war, which meant— but the man in the brown suit sneezed loudly, enunciating Ah-ah-choo, and I missed the end of the sentence. What did it mean? I heard someone say, furtively, Cuba. On the drive back to the cottage, my colleague said, You were quiet tonight. The moon was high in the trees. I remembered a book from childhood, two siblings sent into the night to fetch milk from a farmer. A wild, knotted tree, the moon full and cold. The children carried a tin pail and the wind blew black leaves through the air. But how did it end? I remembered a warm light from the barn, the farmer, a cow, but then again the tree looming against the night. He turned on the lamp in my bedroom, and, as he laid me down on the bed he looked at me and said, it's too much. It's too much. He came saying my name over and over again. I slept badly, feeling him still and silent beside me. Every so often, in his sleep, he would reach out and pull me close. I rose, put on a robe and went out into the garden, struggling to breathe, panic rising, rising. I could feel tears in my eyes and some already running down my cheeks although I had not known I felt like crying. I

stood outside for a while on the frozen grass, looking at the moon, looking at the branches moving slightly under the street lamp. I could hear cars passing on the main road. I had read in the newspaper earlier that day that the Great Barrier Reef had undergone a bleaching event for the second year in a row, causing despair amongst the scientific community. Increasingly, scientists doubted that the reef would recover. It is likely, they said, that the reef had reached terminal stage. The reef was terminal. In the west, great forest fires raged on for months. In the city, the helicopters flew low over the houses at night. All things now, I thought, seemed to have reached their terminus. I heard a noise to my left and started. My neighbour was standing in his garden, barefoot, looking directly at me. I gazed back at him. A moment passed, then he turned, very slowly, and disappeared into his house, pulling the door shut behind him decisively. I got back into bed beside my colleague, whose skin smelled warm. In the dark, I barely recognised him. New shadows appeared on his face, changing its shape. His nose, for instance, was slightly rounded at the tip, whereas before I had thought it pointed. His eyes seemed set deeper in his face than they did during the day. Without his glasses on, his face, normally open and friendly, seemed to me severe and even criminal. I felt afraid. Though he had never given me reason to believe he was a violent man, indeed I had previously thought of him as tender, I became aware of his height, of the size of his hands. Although in certain respects our bodies looked alike, both trim and smooth, his proportions were bigger, and he was stronger than I was. I wondered whether, if he woke and suddenly took it into his head to harm me, there was some way I might escape. I ought to have counted the number of steps from the bed to the door, I thought. But he is a tender man, I reminded myself. During our love-making, I had reached down and grasped his throat with my hand, applying pressure gradually. A look of confusion had passed across his face as his hand met mine. He lifted my hand to his mouth and kissed it.

What is an enemy? An enemy is someone who can only do you harm.

I dreamt of a landscape, overgrown grass, trees blanketing a hillside, leafy canopies moving against the sky, a deep river bisecting the scene. Fat berries pulling on their stems, apples weighing down their branches. Then a breeze came through with a slow hiss, and I knew it carried poison on its back. Here was a green abundance that I could not eat, a cold stream from which I could not drink. Take care, a voice said. Take care to call things by their names.

On Boxing Day I woke to find a pair of soiled women's underpants dangling from the lavender bush in the garden. I pulled on my coat and went outside. My mouth felt dry and my head was throbbing. In the street, chippie containers skidded into potholes. It was very windy. I was never meant for that other life, I thought, intending to walk towards one of the smaller hills. Family, children, even friends, intimacy. Desire as clear-cut, tidy and circumscribed. Control and productivity. Even had I not been cut off from the start by some malformation of the heart, in girlhood, in adolescence, too much had happened. An enemy is someone who can only do you harm. My colleague had tried phoning on a number of occasions since he spent the night. Again, I had fallen short. How could I explain anything to him when the whole enterprise could only result in misunderstanding and recrimination? I could see more clearly than ever that, as Clara had said, this world severs everything tender. We were caught up in the mechanisms of a system in which only certain outcomes were conceivable. I yam what I yam and that's all. I felt tired. I felt the way the years and their accidents had brought back and back the horizon of one's imagination, one's reach in imagining what is possible. One got so tired of this life of the mind. I walked past the local cinema advertising a showing of Blue Velvet in the evening. In any case it was just the holiday making me feel like this, swept down the street by the warm winter wind. I turned away from the park and started to walk towards the high street. The shops were closed, it was still early, but I could see shopkeepers and their assistants hauling around their wares, testing out the appeal of various display arrangements. I sat in an empty bakery, drinking coffee and watching people go by. The traffic slowed to a stop. The lights changed, and they changed again. I sat still. What loss of bearings has fate in store for us today, I thought. What loss.

Ambivalence, according to one writer, is seen as the opposite of happiness, as the failure of a relation. How might one talk about an experience that, without having been defined, nonetheless set effective limits on one's life? One hoped in one's heart of hearts for some salutary logic that was not forthcoming. One sat in silence, at the beginning of a new term, on a committee whose remit was unclear. One thing failed to follow on from the next. And what possible meaning could a People Committee have? Someone circulated a handout. Was everyone agreed that the proposal should go forward? Everyone was agreed. We broke.

You and your tireless pursuit of affliction.

It was late January when the heating went, the streets frozen over, creaking like ice floes. The letting agent turned up with a tan, four hours late, for what was the passage of time to a letting agent, and asked me to show him how I turned on the boiler. One of the many agents of the city's rentier landlords, this man had an air of cultivated obstructionism. As on his previous visits to the cottage, he was tight. He watched me press the button that switched on the boiler. Have you tried wearing a jumper, he suggested, as he let himself out. I pulled on a coat and boots and followed him out the door. He had already disappeared from the garden, even from the street. Gulls tumbled in the white sky overhead. I walked into town to warm myself up, turning down this street and then that. New shops had appeared in place of other shops whose names and purposes I had already forgotten, although I had undoubtedly frequented them at one time or another. I knew so very little about the place, I thought, as I made progress through the empty mid-morning streets. Walking along the main street in the city in which I was born, I could readily identify not just the shop some new shop had replaced, but the one in operation before that, or even the one before that. A pound store that had once been a hair salon that had once been a Jewish deli, where, as a child, I would sit on a stool and consume, on special occasions, a spicy salami sandwich, comprised of a full pound of spicy salami, two pieces of rye bread with mustard, together with a can of cherry cola. The deli was notable for its immaculate white surfaces, white walls and white floors. It looked like a slaughterhouse, scrupulously cleaned after the main activities of the day had been carried out. The place was always full of men standing at counters, carrying briefcases such as they did in those days. But here, I thought, nothing seemed to have made any impression on me at all. I found myself turning on to Jane, a street full of warehouses, my feet carrying me forward, motivated by an obscure logic, on and on, past the garages where men stood peering at the undersides of cars, past a playground where a child kicked at a deflated football, across a busy road and on, in a direction I supposed was more or less due north. It occurred to me that my body was undertaking, of its own volition, almost automatically, a walk it had known well in some other city. Although the coordinates of the city it remembered in no way mapped onto the place in which it currently found itself, my body was nonetheless trying

to take me somewhere, compelled by a yearning I could not explain, and clearly had not been able to eradicate, for home.

That evening, though perhaps it was not that same evening at all but another one altogether, I sat watching a news item about the forest fires out west. People living in cities hours away from the fires had reported waking in the morning to find their cars underneath a fine covering of ash. Photographs showed messages people had traced into the ash: rooster and waddle, waddle in addition to more explicit sayings such as mark+sadie or we burn and burn. In other footage, children with lines of ash smeared on their cheeks were playing a pick-up game of shinty. The reporter blew her nose on-screen and turned the used tissue to the camera so that the viewer could see the greyish expectorated matter. The story brought to mind one spring when the family cat, a ginger, had climbed from the hearth into the chimney, emerging in a state so sooty I thought for a moment a stray had fallen into the house from the roof. She had white paws, grubby for weeks. I had recently read about coal-burning plants dumping ash into uncovered landfills and how this ash, blown on the wind, was called fugitive dust. There was something beautiful in that. A fugitive dust was like a spectre, a silence, a silence that poisoned merely because one lived in proximity to it. Merely because one found oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Merely because, increasingly, it seemed to me, there was no right place or right time, still less did the two together exist anywhere, hard though one looked.

One afternoon, as I crossed the quadrangle to reach my office, I was detained by a man with very black curly hair. He worked, he claimed, in the field of glaciology, which is to say he studied the movements of ice. We scientists, he continued, have been saying it for years. The age of infernos, the age of the great melt, of rising seas and burning forests. What is more, he said, running his hand through his hair, causing it to stand on end, we have been fed the line of equal responsibility. But we are not equally responsible. He pulled a piece of scrupulously folded paper from his pocket and produced a pair of spectacles. He began to read. We accuse the following: the muzzling of scientists, corporate arson, the prevarication of political cowards, ego running unchecked. Today we bear witness to various acts of creative destruction, on our doorsteps, yes, and in our own backyard. And to a greater extent, a much, much greater extent, elsewhere. Aridity lines, coast-lines, pipelines, flood lines, front lines. Tar sands, diamond mines, drought, conflict, not to mention entire nations disappearing beneath sea level. We all know that misery is concentrated in certain areas, typically, he said, areas far away from our ancient and imperial centre, and so we say, let them drown. Let them drown. And so they drown. In short, as to our instincts for subjugation and liquidation, he hoped I would agree that they were not latent, they were felt. The weapons we discharged, we discharged at will. In the main, he said, folding the paper and slipping it back into his pocket, our prospects looked unremittingly grim; one's life, another's life, especially another's life, unsustainable even in the short term. But in this age of aggression and disavowal in desire and defence, what could we be expected to do? Silence had taken a seat.

I sat in the office marking essays, listening to the radio. A man was being asked to describe his experience of being repeatedly misdiagnosed by a series of doctors, each more senior than the last. At first, the man said, they thought it was in the glands, a pre-existing condition of some kind inflamed by a worse than usual bout of flu and an encounter with some pigs. They tried various things, you see, to regulate the glands which they believed to be malfunctioning. He was in pain. Then they said, perhaps melanoma. And so they shaved off fragments of his skin for closer examination. Nothing. What about, they said, kidney disease. Sometimes what seemed to be wrong in the glands was actually wrong in the kidneys. Again more tests. They asked him to urinate into tubes so many times he hardly had occasion to use the toilet. They prodded him all over and, when the prodding did not yield results, they punctured him with needles to take further, deeper tissue samples for testing. Finally they concluded it was not the kidneys at all, could not possibly be the kidneys, but must absolutely be the liver. If not the kidneys, they told him, then definitely the liver. Total liver failure, they told him, apologetically. Liver's going the way of all flesh, they said, which is to say rotting, although they could not quite yet determine the causes of the going. As it happens, said the man, the doctors concluded in the end that it was not in the glands, nor in the skin, nor in the kidneys, but actually and in fact in the liver. Something passed down from father to son, son to grandson, grandson to great-grandson, great-grandson to great-great-grandson, and so on and so forth for generations, every single man on his father's side, it transpired, had suffered from some or other affliction of the liver. In effect, said the man, the hurt was the people you knew.

One student had submitted an essay on Seneca's Oedipus and the significance of what she termed its rhetorical excess. She had not submitted this to me in error, in general the students were highly competent, in fact I had been enlisted to teach a course on Tragedy, the syllabus for which had been set years, if not decades, earlier. The student compared the Senecan play to Sophocles' version. Although, as she freely disclosed, she had mastery over neither Latin nor Ancient Greek, she went on to undertake a skilful analysis that, furthermore, had some bearing on Roman society during the first century AD. I had neither the means nor the motivation to assess the accuracy of her claims, I could merely comment on the structure and expression of her argument, knowing very little about Ancient Rome and still less about Seneca, the subject of this paper. Nevertheless, I took pleasure in the essay, a highly intelligent take that included a suggestive juxta-position of two quotations, supposedly attributed to the playwright: In the morning men are thrown to lions and bears, at noon to the spectators, and: Since he killed, he deserved to suffer this way: why did you, wretched man, deserve to watch? Why indeed. I turned over the next essay, and then the next. I ate my cheese sandwich while scrolling through the news, why indeed, why indeed. Each morning I watched a news show, on which an anchor listed the day's headlines. I wondered, as I ate my porridge, sometimes topped with slices of banana, what the significance might be, for this anchor, of reciting the litany of horrors that comprised the day's news. What was motivating her day in, day out, to show up to work and to read aloud and then expand upon a series of news items from across the world that demonstrated nothing so much as the limitless depths to which human beings had sunk? Daily the news anchor dressed for work and sat behind her desk, and out of her mouth rolling and booming came the facts as they could be verified, one after the other, a kind of ritual penance for unspecified sins she herself had committed. And daily I ate my porridge, topped sometimes with slices of banana, and watched.

Hello, I heard, from the other side of my office door. Hello, are you in there? It was a windy day. Outside the window, clouds tumbled across the sky. Almost spring. So there it was. That feeling, the slow shock of cold. Things happen all around one, and still that feeling is never realised. There is always something worse, I thought, as I opened the door to my interlocutor. Nothing might ever come to an end. It was the man, the colleague in an adjacent department with whom I had gone on various afternoon outings, to the cinema, say, or the symphony, before he finally spent the night. I had not seen him since the following morning, a month or two ago, a matter of weeks, anyway, although as I say he had phoned on numerous occasions and even sent an email to my university address, which I checked assiduously even if I rarely mustered the energy to answer any of the messages. He shut the door behind him and sat down. A man like an unmade bed – now who had said that? He coughed. We begin, he whispered, and trailed off, looking confusedly around. I observed him in silence. We begin, he said again, this time more forcefully, in admiration and we end by organising our disappointment. I was interested in the content of the interaction and regarded the man closely. He was quoting from some poet, I felt sure. For had he not told me he read a great deal of poetry, had he not mentioned the names of some poets, men and women, to whom he felt particularly close? I was astonished at my own lack of attention. I felt a kind of affection for him. What came to mind was a series of words equally not my own. Part sex, part pity; could one call it love? All he could say about this year, he continued, quite confidently now, was that he opted for circumspection, most of the time anyway, he went for the smaller wheel of cheese. The truth was, he said, at a certain point he too had wanted the worst to happen. He had watched the tracks with an anticipation barely concealed. He looked at me directly. He weighed, he knew, a wicked weight. Silent things accumulated within us all. Now, he said, rubbing the palms of his hands together, he took what he could. He looked away, to the window. A balloon rolling into the sky, for instance, or an old person inching forward on the pavement. I believe he was trying to communicate, in his way, that he understood. The obstacles, the past, all the insurmountable things that existed in the rubbish heap between any two people, between him and me. He rose to leave, and as I watched his back,

his elegant back, I thought: No. It is not you. It's the exigencies of the world as it is.

There had been various men at other times, at an earlier stage, men for whom the distinction between sex and suffering was not at all clear. They think we have forgotten, but we have not forgotten. The past floats up on a given day like a fish bobbing belly-up on the surface of a lake we thought was clean and crisp and cool.

In every face I saw Clara. Although a number of her belongings had disappeared in the same way they initially appeared in my cottage, which is to say incrementally and without my noticing it, the house was still crowded with her books. They seemed to have multiplied since she left, growing in number to fill up all the space. They stood in stacks on the floor or else piled on chairs. Treatises on theology, German philosophy, now and again a slim volume of Latin American poetry, not to mention the Russians. Very few women, it went without saying. I spent months designing a system to organise these books, inventing discrete categories such as Cafard or Revolution or else Statues and God. Outside in the garden stray cats leaped continually into the hedge, seldom coming out again with anything in their mouths. I perused her stacks of literary magazines, political papers. She underlined text liberally, seeming to make connections I could not see. In one magazine issue from June of the previous year she had liked a bit about the great ethical question of our age: when did you jump ship? She had drawn an exclamation point beside the print. I supposed that could be applied to a fair lot of things today. And for a moment I was angry. How like her, I thought, how admirable an evasion that was, how almost elegant. I experienced it as a rebuke from a safe distance, from the other side of the cleft of our estrangement. I had stayed on, pointlessly, unconditionally, those underlined words seemed to be saying to me. I could never let anything go. Where was it that I had fallen short? It was a question of having prolonged, of having delayed. What was I supposed to be looking for? One laid one's disasters at another's feet and was faced with the fact of one's own collusion. My guilt. Her guilt. What was the truth? It was an expression of the conflict of ambivalence, nothing was straightforward, sometimes a thing contains its opposite. There. What was to be done when everything was refused in advance? We deny what has been denied us.

And so, said the speaker by way of concluding remark, the engines of its transitive performance produce what you see here. We sat in stunned silence for a moment. Finally, an intrepid member of the audience offered a tentative clap of her hands, and immediately the rest of us followed suit, our applause rising in volume to a deafening roar as though to compensate for the momentary lapse in etiquette. The speaker, who rather sagged than stood, wiped his mouth in bewilderment. The Wednesday seminars continued to be held, in spite of the worsening weather, the irregular faculty attendance, and the general atmosphere of lethargy and crisis. What you see is what you see. Audience members sat slumped in their seats murmuring to one another, infernal peers sitting in council. Like sleepwalkers we proceeded down the aisles towards the wine reception. A colleague who specialised in Early Modern Drama grasped my shoulder, presumably in a gesture of greeting. He had, he said, recently travelled to Norway for a conference. His primary occupation at the time of his trip, part of which he travelled by train and part by ferry, had been suicidal ideation. On the train, in the taxi, on the gangway, on the ferry, he had thought of the possible ways in which he might end his own life. On the boat, he said, observing the water on all sides, he was struck with the realisation that this despair was limitless. As they neared landfall, which is to say as they approached their destination, he had seen, in the middle of a field, a pile of tyres burning on and on. When he mentioned this fire, this mountain of burning tyres, to one of his colleagues in a restaurant later that evening, she had appeared puzzled. But naturally it was against the law to burn tyres in Norway, she said. How was it possible that this colleague, who had travelled by the same route, even by the same boat, with whom he had in fact been standing at the time he first perceived the heap of tyres aflame in the field, how was it possible that she had failed to notice this extraordinary occurrence? As well as the toxic smoke that had travelled on the wind, even out to sea, and that burned their eyes as they stood out together on the ship's deck, there was too the unmistakable choking smell of burning rubber that travelled with it. What he had learned from this encounter, said the man, was that it was a fragile consensus that sustained us, that sustained our sense of ourselves, of ourselves in relation to others, even our sense of being in the world. And in that Norwegian restaurant, or more precisely in

that Italian restaurant in a small Norwegian town, as he had sat eating pasta with a number of colleagues, some of whom he knew quite well, drinking red wine, it was above all the fragility of that consensus that struck him, the tenuous links that bound us to ourselves, to each other, and to our own lives. He suddenly saw the world for what it was, populated by atomised individuals united only by chance or proximity, necessity or interest. We were linked together, he said, in the final analysis, by disgust and envy and lived on in boredom and astonishment.

A fragile consensus. A starting point. The process of seeing is also the process of saying, and so what is required is an intervention into the grammar of looking. Something about refusal, about changing language, ordering anew, possibility. I groped for the thought. The light coming through my eyelids felt like morning. Pale shadows on the walls. A nun in full habit, a prostrate sister of the old order, too feeble to hate well, let alone love. Eyes cast to the gravel path and a strict, oh, a strict ordering of the heart. She reached for my hand. An order to the heart, a general paralysis of will. And then I woke fully with a searing in my head. I wanted to be swaddled. I wanted to be perilously ill, near death, in a hospital with clean flannel sheets tucked tightly under the mattress, holding me down. I left the house and went up the nearby hill, with each step trying to dispel the feeling that had come over me. I reached the very top and stood facing the wind, but nothing changed. It did not blow away. I lay down. Again nothing. A band of pressure tightened around my ribs and grew tighter each time I exhaled. I watched the morning clouds go by. So this was it at last. Something that had been lying on the lungs, or a sudden bleed in the brain. Beside me a black-bird twittered in the dust. After a while I heard a group of people coming up the path. I tried to sit up. I tried to shout, to gesture, to somehow draw their attention. They ate their sandwiches, looking out onto the morning. They came and went without acknowledging my presence. And I had not grabbed these people by the waterproofs and begged them to have me committed, immediately, to an institution that would strap me to a firm bed, an institution in which I would be fed and watered and medicated at regular intervals, and in which, if I maintained good behaviour, I might watch television some afternoons. I would sleep in a narrow room with high walls, in a single bed bolted to the floor. Upon admission, I would have been divested of all my belongings and clothing and so the room would be empty. Please, I thought, standing up, please let something happen.

The deceitful stupidity of serious man and his universe.

The ice began to melt on the river, and the river turned swift and killing. An ice jam took out a walking bridge to the south of the city. When I paid my visit to Charlotte for a wax, I found she had hung photographs of the ice floes along the walls of the salon's back room. Above all else, she said, the images showed that a reasonable expectation of life was never quite warranted. The spring arrived, we were promised yellow flowers stretching out in a never-ending line, we were promised trees wearing white for Eastertide, the loveliest trees, and a light that existed in spring and not any place or time else. She went down to the river-side and, in the long evenings, listened to the groaning of the ice. Her body, said Charlotte, twirling the hot wax around a wooden stick, knew before her brain, which is to say she felt it before she thought it. She had become a stopped clock. It was not personal, she said, it was merely physical, like the disgust she felt when, walking in the high street, working at the counter, sitting on the train, a man's glance fell on her. Charlotte tapped my ankles to signal it was time to raise my legs in the air. She applied the wax to my backside. And then all at once everything had melted, everything had bloomed. And one stayed inside. One dusted the walls. This turbulent green proved too much, one could not, said Charlotte, cope with it. She tore off the strip of wax. There was enough, after all, to be getting on with. You're young still, or relatively, anyway, she said, looking at me closely. If she could have told her younger self one thing, one single thing, she said, it would have been that the best a person can hope for is some time on muted strings, which was to say, a life that reverberated dimly but agreeably. As one got older, one went in pursuit of this tempo, largo, grave, adagissimo, she said, tapping the stick on my leg in time with each syllable. And in between the beats, she said, one began to produce a silence. What it required was an economy of the heart.

My contact hours with the students were negligible that spring semester, since in an unlikely turn of events I had won a research grant that had bought out most of my teaching. Sometimes I went to the cinema in the middle of the day, the theatres were always full of people of all ages, not just pensioners, but children who might otherwise have been in school, adults who might otherwise have been working at their jobs. For weeks my next-door neighbour, who seemed to have put his home improvement operations on hiatus, had instead woken me at three-thirty in the morning by playing, loudly, what sounded like a repertoire of golden age Hollywood film scores. When I would wake again at seven, the music would still be playing. The cinema showed new releases alongside old favourites, so I was alarmed, though not at all surprised, to see this neighbour sitting several seats away from me at a matinee screening of *For a Few Dollars More*. Insofar as I had a favourite genre of film it was to be sure the spaghetti western, even though I often found the plots difficult to follow. I liked the way the protagonists rode off into the hills, or into the sunset, or into the desert, pulling carts laden with bodies or loot, or else on horseback, chomping on a cigar. The previews were under way, I was eating popcorn and drinking my afternoon beer, I was content. I could hear my neighbour weeping quietly a few seats away. It was not that the sound gave me pleasure, exactly, it was not as if one could say that my neighbour's weeping was as music to my ears, at the same time my instinctive and implicit refusal to engage with my neighbour's sorrows gave me a kind of gratification. How many times had I been wept at, been expected to lend a comforting bosom or a series of pats on the shoulder. There, there, I was expected to say, there, there. My whole life long I had listened to the tragic life stories of various men, their trials and tribulations, how at school they had been puny, weak or stupid, how their peers had held them in contempt, how women, particularly their mothers, had held them in contempt, how their fathers never loved them. I watched as these stories were deployed as alibis for all kinds of crimes and misdemeanours that they had committed and would continue to commit for the rest of their lives. And so, as my neighbour wept beside me in the theatre, as I silently repudiated him, I felt happy. I did not need him to recount the particulars of his sadness. In the first place, a few days earlier I had overheard him through the wall,

screaming at his mother and teenaged sister who had come to visit him for a first and no doubt final time. There was a daughter somewhere, one he was not allowed to see, perhaps the sister was in fact his own daughter, in any event, his family stayed on through an afternoon during which time he held them responsible for his misery, alternately bellowing and beating on the wall connecting our two cottages. The film came to an end as Clint Eastwood rode off into the horizon with a cart full of bodies. I stood and brushed the remains of the popcorn from my clothing. My neighbour was slumped over his knees, moaning. At last I looked over at him. His hair was clean, though poorly cut, and the jumper he was wearing hung off his shoulders. He looked up at me with an expression of fury that made him seem almost incandescent. For a moment, his strength of feeling made him look frightening. I left the cinema and went into the street. The sandwich board outside the newsagent was declaring a state of irreversible national decline. All the same it was spring. In the park at the end of the street the crocuses had come up. A balance might be struck. At home I lay on the sofa with the window open, a light rain just beginning to fall.

I went to the capital to see an exhibition of work by a painter I had once loved, quiet and inward, gridded, the low vibration of her lines and colours that hummed and hummed. First there was the trial of getting to the central station, navigating the city centre on a weekend, where on the pavement so much of the city's humanity limped and mewled out its days. There was a dull despair at the back of everything, or else a kind of brutality one found here and there, being jostled in the street, crowded in the station, scowled at on the train. All the same, there was the morning, the first days of spring, a paper cup of hot coffee. Leaving the station, I watched the rare sunlight streak across the tracks, across the gardens, the silver northern light. The following week the clocks would go forward, more dim mornings and the long, bare evenings of unbroken cloud. As the train sped through the surrounding landscape, a feeling came over me of electric emptiness, of exhilaration as the mind unhooked itself. Or perhaps it was only a delay, a suspension of feeling. Crows flew over a green hollow, the tin roof of a building centre. I thought of a summer, far away now, when I had painted a house. Pollen covering the floorboards of the screened-in porch, a clinging heat. The long row of pines dripping sap. Lying on the rocks by the river. The cold plunge. My thoughts looped on themselves, catching somewhere. A field of unreaped corn. A searing. And then rain. I arrived in the capital, and it was spring, evening, the low golden light bisected by black boughs on the river, the same light that made a delicious magic of the path along the canal. I felt desire and grief twisting together, appearing as rendings in everyday life.

This is the last act.

From my seat on the analyst's sofa I could see the cherry trees beginning to shake off their blooms. It was dusk, the light falling, I held a library book in my lap. I had long given up the habit of concealment, in any event the analyst had barely lifted her eyes from her grocery list as I walked in. She regarded me by this point with barely masked disdain, which I could well understand, I had made no progress one way or the other, I was as surprised as anyone to find myself still standing, not quite erect but there you have it, and now the staff wellness programme was ended, it was our final meeting. The birds were beginning their night-time routine, the chirping, the bedding down. I sat looking at the analyst for a few moments, remarking the way her brow furrowed, how she sucked on the end of her pen as she tried to remember some crucial ingredient. Perhaps after all she was human too. She was not impervious. She had her own feelings about things. She looked up, and I wondered whether I had spoken the words aloud. Thrown in her own throw, she murmured. What, I said. We looked at each other. It was our first exchange, I observed with interest, the first time either one of us had responded directly to an interposition made by the other. The analyst nodded. So perhaps we had achieved something, after all, in spite of everything. Either way, she said, I was to be let loose on the world, presumably alongside and at the same time as every other member of staff at the university, all of us who had been induced to undertake a time-limited programme of self-examination that had now run its course. We had, it seemed, at least in an official sense, found ourselves, and we would be issued with a certificate of some kind to mark the occasion. She spoke as if she were asleep, and the words were like an incantation, an invocation to some obscure authority. It immediately calmed me down. It was like a song, which made me yearn to lie down and to sleep for a long time. In fact I did lie down on the thick pile carpet covering the analyst's office floor, heaving myself off the sofa with great effort and slowly lowering my body to the ground. It was an action that she approved of, that seemed even to impress her. I felt a certain amount of goodwill in the room, after all it was our last meeting, we had shared the space, if not any kind of mutual understanding, certain things were in the end unrectifiable. I asked if she could go on talking for a while, and she did, reading with great care the contents of the

grocery list she had produced, one item after another and another. We went on like that for a long time.

The end-of-year faculty party was announced, and though a solitary person in the main, I found myself, in the long grey twilight of those May evenings, thinking of Clara, and so I went. The event was held in a hall with two rows of great white columns. The ceiling, which was arched, was illuminated by a system of recessed lighting, so that one could see, from the carpeted hall, the intricate carvings that covered its surface. A string quartet played. I regretted coming almost immediately when it became apparent that I was the only single woman in attendance, and with that realisation came the swift certainty that all of the other attendees of the party, men and women alike, viewed me as they might a heron raiding a nest. The women stood in an attitude of teachers on a field trip while the men huddled in knots, speaking in low voices. I stood next to, in fact partially hidden by, the marble bust of an important intellectual man, bracing myself for impact and the inevitable probing questions about my marital status. No, I had never learned to behave at parties, but I had found that it did not do to explain to people, well-meaning though they might be, though in truth they rarely ever are, that I came from a long line of mistrustful women, some of whom lived on a rock in the middle of the Bay of Fundy, women for whom it was unthinkable to throw their lot in with anyone else. The usual response to exegeses of this kind was, Oh, so you were an accident. I stood by this bust for as long as I could bear, getting quietly drunk on the gin cocktails being handed round by waiters, and was on the point of abandoning my post and going home when one of these waiters appeared in front of me, bearing a tray with a single pink gin cocktail upon it. I lifted it off, and in the act of lifting, noticed a bit of folded paper clinging to the bottom of the glass. The waiter swept off.

There are moments when one gets the sense that time expands after blinking. There are moments, moreover, when the sense of chronology that has organised one's life – one's experience, in other words, of the passage of time – breaks up and disintegrates. I stood there, in the richly lit hall, trying to make out how one thing hooked onto the next. Up to that point, I had seen the past laid out behind me, a series of happenings made objective by virtue of their having evoked strong emotions, and which it was possible to access at will. All at once it occurred to me that what keeps it all together is only this: the thing and the same thing again. The vague sense of being in danger was not new to me, nor even the feeling of excitement that accompanied it, but the sense of complicity was new. I felt for the first time that someone was trying to communicate with me. For the first time I experienced the note as an opportunity; perhaps it was the mode of delivery, the conscription of the waiter into the plot, the meticulous timing, the sheer, I do not know how else to put it, mischief of it, the sense of the game. I slipped it unread into my bag and left the party, aware of being watched. I caught the bus out of the city, aware with each rotation of the wheels of the strap of my bag lying across my chest, the weight of the bag against my body, and the note tucked away inside the bag. I disembarked and walked under the street lamps. The smell of rain was in the air. The night was very quiet and, as I turned into the narrow street that was flanked on one side by a great oak tree and on the other by a Neighbourhood Watch sign, I felt more awake than I had in months. I proceeded up the garden path. The sound of the key shooting the bolt resounded in the night, carried far away on the wind. I locked the door behind me and went to the kitchen, where I drank a glass of water in the dark. I drew the curtains and turned on my desk lamp. At last, I pulled the slip of paper from my bag and unfolded it.

A something overtakes the mind. We do not hear it coming.

I had a strong sense I had read these words before. I turned the phrase over and over again in my mind, trying to locate it. Written down on some other scrap of paper, a fragment of a thought dropped down and never recovered. We do not hear it coming.

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Was it perhaps that same evening that I opened my laptop to find I had an email advertising a conference in Finland at which Clara was giving the keynote speech? It had been a long time since I had left the country, perhaps never. All the same I could recall places that I had been, or other people, a woman seen from a train window in Denmark, in Norway a pile of burning tyres, places where night proceeds into night and day into day, an airport. Once the rain stopped, the evenings went on and on, glistening violet evenings. A strict ordering of the heart.

I arrived at the airport too early and with no memory of having been there before. I stripped my clothing off item by item, down to the barest essentials, and proceeded through security. I held my breath as I passed through the metal detector, full of an indistinct guilt, a fear of detection, a sudden trepidation that, passing through the security barrier, I was sure to be found out for transgressions I did not recall having committed but was nonetheless entirely guilty of. But nobody looked at me twice as I slipped my shoes on, my belt, my light coat, as I once again filled my pockets with change and keys. These measures were said to be in the interests of keeping people safe, but which people, and from whom, and at what cost. I collected my belongings, feeling more or less the same as before unless ever so slightly diminished, and proceeded through a series of long halls to the gate. In airports I often had the impression of a population of individuals who had never before left their homes, or else not for a long, long time. It was as if the sheer anonymity of the airport caused whatever vestiges of the social order that were left to disintegrate. Everywhere, children wept. Everywhere, tall, unburdened men took the last seats in the food courts just as a person carrying a tray was about to sit down. It was difficult to work out how one could purchase anything, the queuing system having broken down so completely that people jostled one another at checkout counters waving bills. I was very thirsty. The choice seemed to be to join in, elbowing one's way through a crowd of people one forced oneself not to look at, not to recognise, or else to withdraw. I crept into the women's toilets and stuck my head under the tap, which, it transpired, was activated by a motion sensor. I nodded my head, and lukewarm water filled my open mouth. I had to keep nodding my head, or shaking my head, or otherwise agitating it, in order to keep the water going. Around me, women washed or dried their hands, applied or removed make-up, brushed or tousled their hair, all the while pretending not to see me. The water had a familiar taste, but one I could not place precisely. It made me think of the lake in early summer. A frog smell by the water's edge in the morning. Stroke by stroke breaking through the small green things that floated on the water's surface. I drank and drank until I was almost sick. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve and returned to the concourse. For a time I had had a fear of flying. It came on suddenly, one day I boarded a plane, sat down and fastened my safety belt as usual and in

accordance with airline regulations, and felt it all at once, liquifying my insides, making my muscles weak. Everything in my body was telling me to unfasten the safety belt, proceed back down the aisles, past business class, first class, turn left at the pilot's cockpit, walk down the gangway, leave the airport and never return. But the feeling and its ensuing physical responses had so exhausted me that I fell asleep and did not wake up until I felt a flight attendant shaking my shoulder. And then, just as suddenly, I was no longer afraid of flying, no longer afraid of what would happen if one or both of the plane's engines suddenly exploded, if the pilot and the co-pilot were immobilised by sickness or injury, if one of my fellow passengers took it into his head suddenly to open one of the plane doors, causing the temperature and the pressure to drop or rise sharply. I often asked myself which was more irrational, to be afraid or unafraid, whether my fear correlated with a fear of death and that therefore the loss of this fear suggested I no longer cared if I lived or died. I tried to match up these two periods, of becoming afraid and then becoming unafraid, to events in my life more generally but came up with nothing conclusive. More than anything, I feared being seated next to someone who wanted to engage me in conversation, who wanted to draw me out, make little comments about the meals doled out by the cabin crew, about the drinks, share a laugh about the movie they happened to be watching in the screen sunk into the back of the seat in front of them, tell me about the occasion of their travels, who wanted to conscript me in short into the project of normalcy, as if it continued to be, as if it ever had been, possible to simply carry on living, the world being what it was. Simply put I had no interest. I did not want to be drawn in. I did not want to be submerged. I wanted to stay intact, above water, myself. I wanted to remember. I was so full of stories that I was choking them back up, but whose were they and what, in the end, did they amount to?

I woke at midnight in another country, the sun nodding at the horizon. I walked through the town, a series of gridded streets that looked like those in a place where I had once lived, perhaps they were in fact one and the same, since it was true that though not everything was possible, an infinite number of possibilities nevertheless existed, nothing was settled. Time moved like a pair of frog's legs twitched with electrified scissors, not a presence or an absence, but one felt it just the same. What forces were driving me then? I walked to the quayside, the pale blue sky reflected in the water, the buildings bordering the river reflected in the water, shivering in the breeze. The sun did not rise for it had not set but it stretched itself over and above the city. She is under this same sky, the very same sky. This sense of kin.

Clara's keynote was scheduled for the following evening at the city science museum, to be followed by a reception, at which the mayor and other town functionaries would be present. I went out into the street. A boy sat on a bench, and I watched as he consumed, one after the other, three unmarked bottles of blue liquid. In the market square, I obtained a coffee and pastry from a taciturn young man and sat by the water. There were flower vendors and a long line of stalls selling fish, wool and tourist apparel. I proceeded down a number of tree-lined boulevards and soon found myself sitting on a bench in a leafy esplanade beside an unkempt woman, who appeared to be asleep. Somewhere in the park, I could hear competing radios playing American pop music and klezmer. I took the opportunity to inspect more closely the woman sitting next to me. Her clothes appeared new, though dirty, while her hair was sparse but clean. A moustache curled over her upper lip. She awoke with a cough. Ah, she said, blinking up at me. She brushed the remains of her breakfast from her suit jacket and sat up. Did I speak English, she wanted to know. I had, she said, a slightly austere expression that suggested it might be the case. Of course, she had learned English at school, the school systems in the country were the best in the world, outperforming countries in subjects they themselves had devised. Shakespeare, for instance. She smiled, and I could see a row of sharp and even teeth. Her husband, she said, had thrown her out the night before. It was the latest battle in an abiding war between the two. They had married too late in life, she said, to be able to tolerate each other. And so in order to keep themselves amused down the years, they engaged in provocations of various kinds. Last night, she said, she had effected the final part of a plan that had been months, if not years, in the making. In retaliation her husband had thrown her into the street. Given the circumstances, it was unclear who currently held the upper hand, she or her husband, since although she had executed a master stroke, her husband had taken possession of their home in a neighbourhood nearby. She was resting on the bench while she planned her next move. Did I like the city, she asked. A place where North met East in all sorts of unexpected ways. On the one hand one was presented with the façades of buildings, a distinctly Nordic architectural style; on the other hand, the enormous, red stone Orthodox Church loomed over the city. For her part, ever since she was a girl, she had loved riding the streetcar. It was

the one thing she and her husband had in common, she said, their shared passion for the city's trams. On any given Sunday, although they might have been bellowing at each other since daybreak, perhaps even using the breakfast things as projectiles to hurl at each other, they could always be found riding happily in the streetcar by ten o'clock in the morning. She sighed. She had lived in the city her whole life. She loved the place still, in part because no matter how much seemed to change, the city in effect stayed the same, corruption in city hall, corruption in the district court, but they had their baby boxes, it was true. The world smiled upon them for their baby boxes. As to their institutions, she said, gesturing around with her left hand, there was no doubt they liked a park. On every street corner, the city authorities insisted, a park. It was a kind of mania. There were times in her life when the sight of a park bench nearly drove her to derangement. But, said the woman, tapping the bench, needs must. She had retired years ago from the Natural History Museum, her speciality was insects. She was relatively well known within entomological circles in Finland, having produced two books on local caterpillars. People thought of the butterfly, she said, the more charitable ones perhaps even the moth, but when the lepidopterists had finished pinning their specimens to the wall, did anyone think of the lowly caterpillar? As with so many things, we ignored the caterpillar at our own peril. What was the butterfly without the caterpillar? We would do well to remember where we came from, she said, the factors that went into our development, how one thing led to another. Since I claimed to be a specialist in literature, I would no doubt be aware of a certain writer's love of butterflies, perhaps I had seen photographs of him in plus fours, clutching a net. As to his writing, she could not judge, she had read one of his novels, a family saga, the title was a girl's name, she could make neither heads nor tails of it, all the same, there was undoubtedly beauty there. His forays into lepidoptery, however, left something to be desired. She understood, she said, that the process of transformation was decidedly attractive to the layperson, who viewed it as the caterpillar's long-awaited realisation of itself. At the same time, she said, it was erroneous to view the caterpillar's translation into a butterfly as a single occurrence, or even as a change at all. In a sense, she said, pulling a nail file from her breast pocket and beginning to file her nails, the caterpillar was always a butterfly. Interested parties had long wondered whether and at what point the caterpillar knew it would become a butterfly, which she

supposed was a thought-provoking question, after all one did sometimes find oneself wondering, when faced with a recalcitrant child, at what age it would know it would become an adult. But for her, a far more interesting problem was, she remarked, replacing the file into her pocket, whether the caterpillar recognised itself in the butterfly and, if so, what the substance of that recognition was. Rising from the bench she turned to thank me. It had been a productive afternoon, and now it was time for her to face her husband. A little while later I too rose from the bench. All was still.

That evening, the light stole into my hotel room and covered everything evenly. What it all seemed to require, I thought once again, was a mutation in the grammar of looking. If one could only reset it all, the order of things, break down the systems that defined one's vision, that regulated one's course of action. Undo everything, learn to see things clearly, to speak again, to be intelligible to one another: to make plain. Love was fugitive, and faltering; it was not faith, it was not promise. We met each day as strangers. What basket could be woven that would bear this weight? Light as a feather, stiff as a board. There was only so much I could have done, I saw that now. I had acted, if not well, if not even decently, at least without any malignant intent. I lay back on the bed and watched television, a group of people in business attire engaged in busy explanation. They were floored, they said. Democracy in America and so on. Not there when we needed them most, they considered commitment to be both the answer to the problem posed and the problem itself. I began to doze. Had we seen their urban chickens, asked one of the people. Had we seen their bicycles. Someone had stolen their bicycles. I woke suddenly. Why had I come. The world and its vice-like grip around my chest. One was free to go for a restorative walk in the woods, by all means, but more often than not, it seemed to be the case that there one would find a body floating belly-up in the creek. One's closest friends and relatives saw one off, wishing one good luck and a slow ride up a long hill. On the television now, a seagull snatched a baby bird from beneath its mother and swallowed it whole. I had never bothered to learn about birds, even when owls seemed to be having a moment I could not bring myself to find out why. One bird was the same as another, as far as I was concerned. A second chick hid underneath the mother, who pretended to ignore the gull's continued incursions. The gull pecked in the air around her and she remained immobile. I rose to open the window. A few streaks of cloud hung in the pale sky. In the street below, a group of people of about my age wended their way towards the river, each with his or her arm draped around the shoulders of the person on either side. After all, they seemed to be enjoying themselves, these people. They had had a bit to drink, perhaps had gone dancing. One shrieked as the heel of her shoe broke off. Laughter. Another carried her on her shoulders, staggering slightly. I yawned. I had never been able to make out quite what

it was all about. I wondered if they were going to swim in the river. I had always liked that, swimming in a river, in the summer, early morning, the cold water combing through my hair as I swam upstream. There were seasons for everything. The rapids too dangerous at a certain time of year. So many rules it was so easy to transgress, unknowingly, and at great personal cost. And still there were people out in the early hours, laughing; still one was cajoled by the deep whirlpools to swim in the river too early in the spring. It was so short a space of time in which the days were long and getting still longer, so quick for the nights to lengthen by a few minutes here, a few minutes there. One walked out of the front door on any given spring evening, feeling this inside of oneself, how brief it all was, how there had not been enough time, all the tasks left undone, tasks one had barely begun before it was too late, how one ought to have been better. There was something in the way the trees moved at this time of year, the way the leaves tossed in the street light at night, a lushness. But it does not have to be like this, I thought. At last, I slept.

I stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at the hotel bed on which I had scarcely made an impression. Was there a note on the bedside table? It was morning. Months before, I had attended a lecture at which the speaker claimed that all touching, even as it expressed its yearnings, contained what she called an infinite alterity. Infinities subtracted from infinities. We were alone and alone and alone. I let the door shut behind me and walked down the long, carpeted corridor. I made towards the street, towards the confrontation of the day.

I soon found myself at the museum, paying the price of admission and proceeding into a dark exhibition room. I watched as a camera panned across a summer landscape of lichen. I became aware of a figure sitting next to me, a woman, who was looking on in disgust at the recording. She did not, she said, know what was worse. Night growing to cover everything up, or the day. She had come, she said, to witness the midnight sun. Since childhood she had wanted nothing more than to watch the sun stay in the sky. She had wanted to walk through a town whose night streets were absolutely deserted, under a low sun. How it had played on her imagination all these many years! A daylit city whose businesses were shuttered, whose boulevards and back alleys were empty, a city where not a single voice could be heard, nothing except for the wind and her own breathing. And so, at long last, she had travelled north, on a whim as it were, she had been fed up with her life back in England, fed up with her job as head of cardiology at a reasonably sized hospital, fed up with her lifelong crook of a husband, and had arrived in the land of the midnight sun. And yet she found herself waking up in the bright middle of the night with a feeling of dread, not to say panic, unaccountable since she had nothing to do, she was perfectly entitled to a holiday, to wander the city at any hour, she was accountable to no one. Something, she said, was not sitting well. No matter where she went, the sun was always around the corner. If she went down to listen to the river, there again was the sun, peeking out from behind the birches. She had come to think it was unnatural, almost obscene. She despaired. She rented a car and drove herself even further north, desiring to cross the line – symbolic but also in fact painted on the tarmac – into the Arctic Circle. Still she felt the same emptiness, as though a wind were blowing inside of her and finding only bare branches to press up against. What a failure of vision her life had become, she said and sighed. She began digging through her handbag. I watched as she pulled out a stick of chewing gum, unwrapped it and folded it into her mouth. And me, she wanted to know, was I here for the conference. Wherever she went, north or south, the entire country seemed to be holding conferences or symposia of various kinds. It often seemed to her as though she were the only person in all of Finland not currently taking part in one of these meetings. If she went to eat dinner in a restaurant, say, half the place would be booked up by one of these groups,

who ordered bottle after bottle of wine, argued loudly over matters of semantic indifference and inevitably made a fuss over the bill. Everywhere she went, it seemed, she was followed by hordes of professionals with name badges affixed to their lapels or lanyards strung around their necks. As a result, she had seen many of the same people in different places in the country and had befriended a number of them. What else could she do? It was like the Americans said, you could either beat them or you could join them. Even in the most unlikely of places, namely the city science museum, there seemed to be an event of some kind under way. One could not make it up. One of her new acquaintances had spotted her in the building's atrium and invited her to the reception, which was just beginning in the hall, would I join her? The two of us stood up and walked into a long white room, which looked through tall windows out onto the water.

What was it I was thinking of? A life on one's own terms, Clara had said. But perhaps after all there was a dignity there, a solitude. To never let anybody get to the bottom of you. Never to be submerged. To take hold of it, to turn it around in the light, something of one's own. To keep it safe. One tried to move forward, but events intervened. And yet one went on, nevertheless. One pressed on and on, because one had to, not because one might reap the benefits, no, no, nor be content, of course not, that eventuality was foreclosed. But someone else, perhaps, in some other place, in some future time, because after all sometimes one's actions reverberate in ways impossible to foresee. Connections were so fleeting. I stood in the middle of the long hall like a person trying to record the birth of a lightning bolt, its yearnings variously expressed in a flash of what is not yet there. In short, I was beginning to understand.

The Englishwoman stood several feet away, already fingering the stem of a wine glass and talking to someone whose face I could not see. I listened to the low and steady buzz of conversation. Little by little a hush prowled in. It proceeded slowly to the front of the room, it strode up the long flight of stairs to the balcony. We waited. My breath became shorter.

I knew, perhaps had known, all along, that affliction was both pursuit and inheritance, that we soaked up its residue day in and day out. And I knew too that the avenue that lay behind was also the road ahead, and that it had been laid down long ago, by our very own hands and hands just like them. No one came to the dais, nothing happened to break the silence. We were held fast. Absence and presence. She had our attention.

I knew that Clara too was held in a life not entirely of her own making, and if I saw only its outlines, the points at which she came into contact with the world, that at least was something. I would learn to take a wider view. I turned my head towards the fire exit on my right, whose window afforded a view of the long grassy expanse leading to the river. And when I looked through the window, there she was, on the other side of the thick glass panel, gazing upon the water, regarding the evening with I knew not what expression. I considered the face to come of my life. I thought too of my work, the cottage, the drowning city, Clara herself. Anything that could be called a past. One's life was shot through with just these kinds of remainders. A moment before she began to walk away, she turned her head. I moved to press the bar that would open the door, but was prevented by a series of brightly coloured signs indicating it was equipped with an alarm that would sound upon the bar's depression. What was to be done when everything was refused in advance? I took one long, last look.

It was a warm evening. I waited in the street outside the hotel for the taxi that would take me back to the airport. Everything seemed to have split its skin, to have softened, the buildings faded into one another.

I stood in baggage claim watching the same brown bag going round and round on the carousel. It was not my bag, it did not seem to belong to anybody in particular, everyone had already recovered their bags and left the airport, hours ago, hours ago. Perhaps mine had been lost in transit, perhaps this brown bag and my own green one had been swapped for each other, perhaps some other person stood at a baggage carousel in another country going through the same thought process, only in a different language, who was I to say. Either way, it was gone.

What was left of the past after the loss of people, after the destruction of things? Only a truth that cannot be spoken. The order of the hours, the sequence of the years. If I could be quiet, if I could be still, perhaps then I would hear the words that I had been waiting for all along, as I rolled through my life like a marble on a track, only momentum carrying it forward, only the left and right hands of chance and circumstance moving it this way and then that. Clara had opened her mouth. A something overtakes the mind. We do not hear it coming.

Well, I thought at last, do we not? I think after all that we do.

It comes in like a rushing noise.

[notes](#)

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Thank you in all ways, to those named and unnamed, because the mind does not always grasp its own maps as conscious.

The Dyzgraphxst, 2020

Here are a very few of them:

[12 John Felstiner, Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew, 2001](#)

[20 Virginia Woolf via W. G. Sebald, Bookworm podcast](#)

[36 Maggie Nelson, Bluets, 2009; Mary Ruefle, Madness, Rack, and Honey, 2012](#)

[53 W. G. Sebald, The Rings of Saturn \(trans. by Michael Hulse\), 1995](#)

[54 Arthur Schopenhauer, Studies in Pessimism \(trans. by T. Bailey Sanders\), 1913](#)

[56 Patricia Malone](#)

[57 Dubravka Ugrešić, The Museum of Unconditional Surrender \(trans. by Celia Hawkesworth\), 1996; Fleur Jaeggy, I Am the Brother of XX \(trans. by Gini Alhadeff\), 2017](#)

[62 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* \(trans. by Bernard Frechtman\), 1948](#)

[79 Thomas L. Dumm, *A Politics of the Ordinary*, 1999](#)

[80 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, 1969](#)

82-3 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 2003

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[108 Jane Cooper's Foreword to Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 1996](#)

[109 Jean Rhys, *Letters 1931–1966*](#)

[110 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* \(trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott\), 1974](#)

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[137 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, 1994](#)

[140 T. S. Eliot 'Hamlet and His Problems', 1919](#)

[141 Deborah Nelson, *Tough Enough*, 2017](#)

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[177 Svetlana Alexievich, *Second-Hand Time* \(trans. by Bela Shayevich\), 2016; William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902](#)

[178 Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', 1939](#)

[191 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*](#)

[204 Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, 1972](#)

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213 Gertrude Stein, 'Poetry and Grammar', 1935

216 A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*, 1896

217 Frank O'Hara, 'Aus Einem April', 1954

231 Emily Dickinson, *Note on wrapping paper*, quoted by Marta Werner in *the Open Folios*, 1995

243 Gertrude Stein, *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*, 1973

246 Patricia Malone

249 Karen Barad, *Keynote*, *TransImage* 2018

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Kathryn Scanlan

Real Life

Brandon Taylor

Indelicacy

Amina Cain

Empty Houses

Brenda Navarro

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Our Lady of the Nile

Scholastique Mukasonga

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