

The Telephone Girl

Ed James was bothered. “Bothered *greatly*,” he’d tell you if you asked. But you wouldn’t because you could tell right off if you bothered to notice. *Greatly* was his latest coup. He had, near as he could tell, coined a phrase, ingeniously invented a locution, and it turned more than a few heads. Some, like his cronies up to the college in Rome, favored it *greatly*. Others, like his mother, found it grating. He had hoped it would turn the head of Mimi Goncourt, for he favored *her* *greatly*. He still hoped it would, in fact. But for the moment, he was distracted. Bothered. Bothered *greatly*.

For the moment? He had been bothered for more than a week. His mother thought him moping, but it wasn’t that at all. His mother thought a whole lot of things that weren’t *at all* he’d found out. Found out since he went up to the college. The Austro-Hungarian Empire did NOT, as his mother insisted, stretch from the Adriatic to the Baltic, hence Samuel Ward’s “from sea to shining sea.” The Amish were NOT a lost tribe of Israel banished from Europe by the Hapsburgs. Nor were the wigs worn by Washington, Adams, and Jefferson imported from Germany and woven from the hair of the great and powerful Maria Theresa, Queen of Hungary, Empress of Austria and mother of the famed Marie Antoinette. Why would someone steal a dead woman’s hair to make wigs for American revolutionaries? Precisely, says his mother.

Ed wondered about these things as he spied Mimi Goncourt in the window of the Homer Telephone and Telegraph Company. Her hair coiled and fell in thick cascades of gossamer. Each lock would provide ample material for a goddess’ hairpiece. The Homer Telephone and Telegraph Company had hired Mimi as their telephone girl three months earlier. She replaced Velda Keusch in the window seat, Velda who quickly (some said *too* quickly) married Viktor Kusch. While Velda and Viktor cuddled and cooed, cozy in each other’s arms in the apartment over the bank, Mimi graced the window at HT&T with a full view of Main Street. Main Street returned the blessing with a full view of Mimi. From just such consecrated ground was Ed able to watch her smile as she made her connections, her disconnections. Greatly so. From the west side of Main Street, the ampersand hid her smile. Ed walked to the east until one T overhung her like an umbrella. Connections. Disconnections. Secure behind the glass and

safely seated under the umbrella that was the T, oh, it bothered him *so*.

Nothing his *mother* said on such subjects bothered him much, if at all. He had, however, read something that filled a crack in his mind. He'd read it up to the college. He hadn't thought much about it at the time, but now, as anyone with any brains at all could plainly see, it was a deeply troubling reading. He'd memorized it. Not on purpose. But it filled a crack in his mind and filled it whole. With Mimi under the T in the window on Main Street, he found it swelling up, pressuring against the rest of his brain, incrementally increasing his pain until he was forced to actually mutter Edward Sapir's blasphemy:

The telephone girl who lends her capacities, during the greater part of the living day, to the manipulation of a technical routine that has an eventually high efficiency value but that answers to no spiritual needs of her own is an appalling sacrifice to civilization. As a solution to the problem of culture she is a failure.

As often as the passage was to occupy him in the coming days, it was the last time he produced it in its entirety; he lost sense as he gained clarity—for in the transmission from his tongue to his ear, the message was garbled. All he heard himself say was:

The telephone girl . . . is an appalling sacrifice to civilization. . . . She is a failure.

Whether the ellipses represent mental static or simple inattention is immaterial. The message he *heard* could not fail to *bother* him. *Greatly* so. If, he thought to himself, of course, if he ever crossed paths with one saphead Sapir, well, he'd say something, something . . . something . . . *sapid*. Something *sapid*. He let the words glide about his tongue for a good long taste and thought about serving it to his cronies up to the college. So distracted, he momentarily forgot Mimi Goncourt altogether and would have forgotten what he was altogether about had not Clem Dinning hawked his name. This transported him to the present and rescued his foot from what would have been a certain soaking as it hovered above a deep and muddied puddle. The surveyor hawked again, and his momentary forgetting faded into eternity. Ed's attention returned to the present, the street and the

pole in his hand. The surveyor waved him to the left, and he shuffled a step. His foot received its due. Cheated once by the timely intrusion upon his reverie, Fate reasserted its claim in the form of a soaking. A slight smile slid across the surveyor's lips.

The paving of Main Street was a long time coming. The dust from the increasing number of automobiles speeding through the town on any given summer day had become a public hazard said Hirem ("the Mayor" appended some, "the Witless" added others, "Hirem Fire'm" intoned a few without cause--Mayor Hirem "the Witless" never hired, let alone fired, anyone ever). Hirem had addressed city council: Hoving of Hoving's Hardware, Kesling of Kesling's Dry Goods, Musil of apothecarian fame, and Wilson of Frederick's Grain and Feed. Rischel from the *Ode* had been there as well, but it was hard to tell whether as a reporter or as a representative of the paper's owner. Rischel himself probably wasn't sure.

It had been the winter meeting of Homer's finest business minds. Hirem "the Witless" invoked the wrong problem at the right time--their memories of dust were ancient. The destruction wreaked by winter on Main Street was itself formidable and inescapable: cracks and holes emerged through the slush, and the mud that coated the floors of every merchant in town was deep enough to seed. But Hirem did have a point--if they paved, they wouldn't have to oil the street as they did every June and that would be "a savings amortized. . . ." With that utterance, Hirem drifted into pure babble. Economics was never foremost in his brain.

The merchants had enough smarts to see the merit in the plan, and more than enough smarts to spread the cost to the general citizenry of Homer. Allan Dumfries ("the schoolteacher" said some, "the communist" grouched a few, "simply addled" added others) tipped his cap to their skullduggeries when, several years later, the town began paving the rest of the streets. Then, the merchants refused to pay, arguing that those who lived on the streets should bear the cost of paving. So began the Battle of Homer. Main Street fought First Street. First Street fought Second. Washington, Adams, and Jefferson Streets fought the numbers; the streets fought the roads, and the Rural Routes fought them all until Hirem Fire'em loosed a bottle of champagne midst the flying fists and announced his engagement to Ellie Stiles with a toast about "a craving amorized." For one surprising moment, you could have heard a cork drop. Then someone mumbled something about a craving already satisfied, and someone muttered

something about raising Cain. After that, the battle evaporated with Hirem's bubbles.

Precisely where Ed James lived is neither here nor there, but he was hired by the surveyor as an apprentice for the initial project, with the promise of work later in the summer in charting the creek for a proposed dredging that would increase the flow of the proposed sewer once it was installed and connected. More to the point is that Ed stood on Main Street, shaking the water from his foot while attempting to steady the staff for the surveyor. He had been promised a look through the theodolite and an explanation of azimuths in general and of azimuthal equidistant projections in particular. It was an awfully technical business, and he was more than happy to be learning something he couldn't learn up to the college. Greek and Latin were all right, he supposed, but this was something *greatly so*. He tried to comprehend what the surveyor had told him—that the pyramids and the Parthenon were surveyed with rocks and strings and water. He was baffled. As the water seeped from his shoe, he considered the fun he would have with azimuths and the slap he'd get from his mother if he told her what he was up to this fine morning. Better to be surveying azimuthals than projecting them, he mumbled, testing the sentence for its future impact on his cronies up to the college. The surveyor had his eye pressed to the theodolite and was waving at him. Ed waved back and smiled—it was like getting his picture taken. The surveyor waved more emphatically, snapping Ed to attention. He shuffled to the right, his wet foot hardly registering the fresh soaking.

Since his return from the college, meals at the James' had been positively garrulous. Ed spent more words in a single question than his family did in an entire dinner. The evening of the day of his soaking, Ed asked his mother who the new telephone girl was. He knew her name, Mimi Goncourt, and he knew where the Goncourts lived, up the river just three miles, or thereabouts. He knew that they didn't used to live there. He had last walked the river with his friends several years ago, and the old farm houses had been empty. They'd walked through the outbuildings and climbed in the loft of one of the barns, but had been afraid to enter the houses. The Goncourts hadn't been there, nor had the Louÿs or the Maugérards, though he thought there may have been Goncourts once upon

a time. He knew, for a fact, that the three families had moved to the United States from France only two (or was it three?) years ago and that none of their children had ever set foot in the school. In short, he said, he knew nothing at all.

The school teacher, Allan Dumfries, had been out to their farms. He told his students as much when the three families moved in, as part of an impassioned speech about America as haven for immigrants of all varieties of persecution, a speech that included pointed references to the French gift standing in New York harbor and the famed Lazarusian lines "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The new families were tired and poor and huddled, but they were free, said Dumfries. They simply wanted to be left alone.

"Who is Mimi Goncourt?" Ed asked again, watching his mother over a plateful of string beans and potatoes. He peered from under his eyebrows, or so he thought. In addition to coining phrases, he had been cultivating a 'look.' He wasn't sure what his look looked like except when his cronies clued him in. His mother, occasionally, let him know with crack on his head that he was behaving like an idiot, but that didn't help him with his 'looks.' He did know, however, that working his eyebrows the way he did gave him headaches. He was thankful that he had grown used to them.

"They're from Alsace," said his mother. That was that. Straight answers meant 'subject closed.' Moreover, they usually contained a number of allegedly self-evident implications. Axioms, as his calculus teacher up to the college would have said. Ed knew now that he would have to discover the axiom(s) for himself. His mother's lips were white from pursing, his father hadn't a notion, let alone a clue, and Ed remained in the dark.

He registered her every nuance, from the attitude she bore before the ring and her dawning, near instant, recognition of the electronic impulse, to the light on the switchboard before her.

Without a plan, much less a clue, Ed set out for work the next morning fired by an impulse, an urge, a desire to learn more about the girl from Alsace. He watched her throughout the day as he tramped up and down Main Street. His cronies would have called it strutting, but they weren't about to revel in his new locutions so they had no call to be calling

him out on his strutting. So he tramped. Had he had a pair of galoshes, he would have felt the image complete (not that he had a clear sense of the image he presented, or wanted to present). Tramping, however, was part of it, and he tramped Main Street like a professional tramp. As he did, he learned about azimuths and mensuration and meridians and verniers and angles of depression and elation and the tilt of Mimi Goncourt's head as she connected. Disconnected. As he tramped, he developed a plan. As he tramped, he developed a second. Two plans! *Greatly so*, he prided himself. How many people never even had ONE plan, let alone TWO? His feet remained dry. The puddles had evaporated.

At lunch, he enacted plan number one. Most people wouldn't have considered it much of a plan at all, but Ed was greatly impressed with himself. The surveyor straightened up from his hunched position behind the theodolite, stretched and announced the lunch break. Ed leaned the staff against the outside wall of the *Ode* and strode (his plan having taken shape, his tramps had become strideful) to the apothecary, which, as fortune had it, was nearly across the street from the offices of HT&T, the window of which displayed his lovely telephone girl. Fortune? Fortune be damned; it was all part of his plan.

Once inside, he lay a nickel on the counter and shuffled to the public telephone at the front of the store. He eyed it carefully, glanced across the street to be sure that Mimi was momentarily unoccupied, checked over his shoulder to be sure that he would not be overheard by the nearest customer, and, satisfied that all was proceeding according to his plan, picked up the receiver. His finger danced. His eyes were riveted on the girl who was separated from him by two thick panes of glass, the gulf that was the street, and the dust that was the world. He registered her every nuance, from the attitude she bore before the ring and her dawning, near instant, recognition of the electronic impulse, to the light on the switchboard before her. He noted the speed with which she pulled one jack from the bank of jacks, the artistry with which her hand paused, poised, the grace with which it was sprung by the fluid and dynamic movement of her rising arm. She was an angel bound to earth by the bundle of twisted fibers, filaments snaking into the firmament to ensnare his telephone girl. She fitted the jack to its appointed hole with such precision. He had not noticed this in his tramping up and down the street! He remarked the tilt of her head as she conducted this ritual, slightly to her left, his right, a lilting tilt as she weighed the

profundity of her actions, inserted the jack, brought her eyelids together once as she drew in a short breath of air, all prelude to the parting of her lips and ...

“Allo?”

Allo? Suddenly, she was beside him, a jarring disjunction. Allo? The sound struck his ear all right, but his brain found it foreign, strange, unfathomable. Allo? The sound tumbled in his head, seeking a comfortable home, denied—vagrancy. He hung up. His plan thwarted before it began. Allo? What was that? A new locution? Greatly *so*. He hovered between utter incomprehension and inutterable affection.

In that hovering, he began anew, without a plan, without a clue, but with all the assurance of someone who has enacted a routine a thousand times or more, that is to say, without a thought in his head. He eyed the telephone, glanced across the street to be sure that Mimi was unoccupied, checked the positioning of the nearest customers, and removed the receiver. He marked every detail of the telephone girl, his telephone girl, from the attitude she bore before the ring and her dawning, near instant recognition of the electronic impulse, to the light on the switchboard that illuminated ever so faintly her internal glow. He remarked the speed with which she pulled one jack from the bank of jacks, her angelic elegance, her poise, the fluid and dynamic movement of her arm as it rose and fell, a fibrillic shimmer. She wove her coils with such precision. How had he not noticed this in his tramping up and down the street! He remarked the tilt of her head as she conducted this ritual, slightly to her left, his right, a lilting tilt as she weighed the profundity of her actions, inserted the jack, brought her eyelids together once as she drew in a short breath of air, all prelude to the parting of her lips and . . .

“Allo?”

Again her voice struck him with the immediacy of her presence. Again comprehension eluded him. Again he was smitten with affection. Again he let the receiver drop with all the assurance of someone who has dropped a receiver a thousand times. He did not notice the irritated, nay *bothered*, yank with which Mimi Goncourt disconnected the jack. Nor did he notice the furrowed brow that she directed his way. He did note that he no longer had a plan, let alone two. Without them, he was adrift. Greatly so.

“This,” said Clem Dinning, “this is the truly great achievement of

modern man.”

Ed was humped over the surveyor’s scope, his eye pressed to the eyepiece, his back shooting pains in star-burst patterns throughout his body, patterns that almost replicated the complicated set of cross hairs in the diaphragm of the theodolite. His eyebrows inflected against the glass. A headache crept from his eyes to the top of his head. Though nearly a quarter of a mile away, though nearly two hundred yards beyond the flag they planted to mark the edge of town, the stump in the cross hairs seemed close enough to touch. The hash marks on the lens were supposed to situate the stump precisely, but they floated in front of his pupils and signified nothing. He had a vague feeling that the entire scope, its tripod and lens, could be raised to accommodate his height without altering the stump’s position in the world. It was a vague feeling, of uncertain origin, perhaps from his lower back. He also had the feeling, not from his back, that to suggest such a thing would be tantamount to blasphemy.

Suddenly, without warning, the stump exploded—twenty years of natural decay compressed into one moment and projected into space. It was there; it was flying apart. A full two seconds passed before he heard the concussion. Another two seconds passed before he heard the laughter.

“It’s a sight, isn’t it?” said the surveyor. He held a stick of dynamite in his hand, flipping it occasionally as he made his points.

“They think the skyscraper is the modern pyramid. The modern Wonder of the World. It isn’t. Not by a long shot.”

Ed waited for the paean to nitroglycerin and was surprised.

“Roads. They’re the modern wonder of the world. Paved roads. You mark my words, paved roads will do more for civilization than skyscrapers, ocean liners, and railroads combined. Their only competition is the telephone.” He gestured vaguely at the HT&T building where Ed’s graceful telephone girl made her connections, disconnections, “but,” he said, “*that* can’t do half what a paved road can do.”

Now Ed was barely listening as the surveyor worked through a complicated algebraic proof that paved roads actually made distance, by which he meant the world, smaller by playing with time. That, he argued, is the foundation of the modern wonders of the world. Do you think Einstein would have arrived at his theory of relativity as quickly as he did without paved roads?

The sound of Dinning’s voice drifted on the air to mingle with the

spasms emanating from Ed's back. He steadied his eye to the glass. The mention of HT&T had brought the scope around, as if by magic, as if the building was a lodestone drawing the point of a compass, compelling the needle to the building, to the telephone girl, his telephone girl. . . . Ed was not an idiot. He knew the telescope collapsed the distance between the viewer and the viewed, witness the explosion of the stump. But the sudden proximity of Mimi Goncourt, illusory as it was, was as concussive as dynamite. The board before her sparkled and glowed as the whole town of Homer conversed. The signals radiated and set Mimi's face ablaze. It was difficult, impossible, to discern whether the fire from her visage cast a veil, cast her own light upon the plate glass that separated her from the world of Homer, cast a glare that seemed to shear space itself into two disjointed realities, or whether that effect was due to the sun lowering in the west, its rays striking, reflecting, refracting against the glass. Perhaps two celestials met in Olympic contest, each veiled and veiling as they vied. His telephone girl and Apollo struggling against the glass, awaiting revelation. Pole Star and Sun: the star was truly stunning. Ed was drawn through time, through space, his eye pressed to the glass, rebuffed by the invisible plane. Ed was sacrificed at the altar of the goddess. Ed was smitten. Ed was a mess.

Ed stood at a boundary stone—a cement cylinder sunk into the ground and stamped with the county numbers, he knew that. He knew it was a hundred yards or more from the river because he could see the river and because he had walked the imaginary line through the brush from the river to the stone. He knew that behind him lay the town and home. Ahead—the Louÿs, the Maugérards, the Goncourts.

He knew he could not cross the boundary.

He hadn't set out to visit the Goncourts. Not at least so as he'd admit it to anyone, himself included. But his feet had brought him north along the river and had brought him to the border. They would go no further. Not that he could admit that to anyone, himself included. Had his brain been in control this morning, it might have argued, had argued from practice, one of Zeno's paradoxes to explain his feet's inability to get where he wasn't going: to get there from here, one must travel halfway there. To get halfway there one must travel half way to halfway there. And so on. And so on through a compression of infinity until one walks away in disgust or

intimidation. Such wasn't the response of one of his cronies up to the college as he'd tried to explain why the water in the water pistol pointed at his face would never reach him, thereby making the pulling of the trigger an effort in futility. Ed wasn't sure that he'd argued the point well enough. He'd tried it again with water dripping from his nose. When he failed once more to persuade the gunman of his folly, he resolved to join the debate club.

Ed's feet sensed the woods stretching into infinity and balked. Would roads shorten either distance or time as Dinning argued? No. The gulf was immeasurable.

"Contemplating the Rune Stone?" Ed's feet nearly breached the gulf between earth and moon with the sudden and unexpected company.

"Rune Stone?" Ed asked.

"The magical markings of the ancient Germanic tribes, their spells and charms cast in stone."

Dumfries. Ed's heart returned to his chest. His feet still hovered an inch or so above the ground ready for flight.

"It's just a corner stone marking a quarter," said Ed.

"Ah, marking a quarter," and Dumfries was off. "A quarter what? A quarter section? But what is that? What does this stone really remark? Does it apply to the world we see? Or does it apply only to the abstract world of numbers? Or," and this with a twinkle, "does it remark upon the mark itself?"

Ed had suffered four years with this man. It was largely upon Dumfries' recommendation that the college accepted him at all, having doubts, as they said, about the depth of his thoughts (which translated to the depth of his pockets, Dumfries said later, with a wagging finger and the admonishment, "Learn languages, you'll appreciate the power of translation"). Having already given over his brain to his feet in acceding to Zeno, he let his feet answer his former teacher by walking with him along the imaginary border to the river. The roar of the spring melt was already history. The river languished.

"The runes," continued Dumfries. "I recommend them. They're not so very unlike the marks you're learning now, though some would have otherwise."

Marks? Now? Ed was adrift.

"You're working for Clem Dinning aren't you? Pay close attention to

him.”

Ed stood, silent, dumb. He wasn't sure he was ready for Dumfries.

“You mean he hasn't had you mapping?”

“We've been measuring Main Street,” said Ed. “Mapping Main Street.”

“And what kind of marks have you been using?”

“Lines.”

“Lines. By all means learn your lines. He hasn't yet shown you the surveyor's runes?”

Ed shook his head. Dumfries took a stick (“a handy tool with infinite applications,” he said) and began making marks in the sand.

He drew two parallels and added a quick series of short horizontals.

“What's that?”

“The cross hairs in the scope?”

Dumfries smiled. A sly smile as if it appreciated his wise-arsed answer. Ed hadn't meant to be wise-arsed and was glad his mother wasn't there to deliver her crack to the top of his head. He looked again at the drawing; it still looked like the cross hairs in the scope.

“Funny guy,” said Dumfries. “How about railroad tracks?”

Revelation was sudden and complete.

“Of course.”

Dumfries drew tufts of grass. They looked just like tufts of grass, and Ed complimented him.

He drew buildings and fences and stone walls, and Ed guessed. It got easier and easier once you knew the trick.

Dumfries began putting little holes in the sand, tiny little pointy marks.

“What's that?” he asked.

Ed couldn't begin to guess. It looked like a lot of little holes.

“Sand,” said Dumfries. Ed winced, expecting his mother's crack on his head. There was a lesson in those points. He knew that, but he sure didn't know what it was.

Dumfries stood and stretched and looked to the sun.

“High time I'm getting on,” he said. “I've got to give lessons up at the Goncourts, would you like to come?”

Ed stood still, mortified at the prospect, frozen, his brain quiet. He appealed to his feet. His feet refused to cross the border that was anchored by the stone. They didn't much care whether the border marked the land or

numbers or involved themselves in the grand discourse of the universe. They wouldn't cross the line.

Dumfries left, whistling through the trees. Their new leaves filled the woods and Dumfries disappeared into infinity. Ed regained some consciousness. He began skipping stones. Oh how they sailed and arced between hops. Mathematics was hard enough, he thought as he gussed at the azimuthals and altitudes of the skimming stones. Philosophy was impossible. *Greatly* impossible. He cursed philosophy. He cursed his feet. He cursed his own inaction. The marks in the sand mocked him. He bent to them, erasing them with a swift sweep of his hand. A solitary heron flew at tree height along the river, noting, no doubt, the water level and using it to measure the likelihood of fish. Inspiration struck and he grabbed the stick—replacing all the fancy symbols with a cryptic rune of his own: Mimi.

By the time he returned from the river, his resolve was set. He would call his telephone girl at home. That much was determined. The plan itself remained unformed. The Jameses had no contract with HT&T and so no connection to the world; Ed had to decide what phone to use in the reenactment of his earlier attempts to speak with his telephone girl. He also needed to identify when he would place his call. He had a vague feeling that had he dialed at that very moment he would have to go through kissable and gossipy Velda Kusch who took Mimi's seat on the weekends. Velda's extra income helped meet the gap between the income and outgo of Viktor's earnings from Frederick's Grain and Feed.

*Dumfries left, whistling through the trees. Their
new leaves filled the woods and Dumfries
disappeared into infinity.*

His mother scolded him for escaping so quickly on a Saturday morning and handed him a list of chores that needed to be done. She pointed item by item at the list as she told him what to do, as if he couldn't read.

"Raking leaves," she said. "That means you take the rake and scrape all the leaves from the rose bushes in front of the house. See? It says that right there." A cracking punctuation.

“Washing windows,” she said. “That means you take a bucket of warm water and a rag and scrub down the windows on the north side of the house, just like it says right there.” A cracking punctuation.

“Burn the brush pile,” she said. “That means you take the matches from the drawer in the kitchen and put the pile to fire. Be sure that you pay attention to it. I don’t want to see the lawn catching fire just like I wrote there,” she said with a cracking punctuation.

“I don’t know how you’ll get it all done today, what with your wasting half of it out who knows where.”

There was to be a cracking, but Ed was in the shed rooting around for the rake. It wasn’t there.

As he washed the windows, Ed recalled that the Goncourts didn’t have a phone either.

By the time he had set the brush pile to a roaring blaze, he knew that he would have to reprise his earlier calls. He would have to wait until Monday when Mimi occupied the window of HT&T. Not until then might he pursue his connection by using the apothecary’s telephone.

Monday noon did arrive despite Ed’s near capitulation to the Zeno-tic infinity that was Sunday. His entrance into the apothecary was smartly engineered. He eyed the telephone, glanced across the street to be sure that Mimi was unoccupied, checked the positioning of the nearest customers, and removed the receiver. He marked every detail of the telephone girl from the attitude she bore before the ring and her dawning, near instant recognition of the electronic impulse, to the light on the switchboard that illuminated every so faintly her internal glow. He remarked the speed with which she selected the jack, his jack, the jack representing him, her angelic elegance, her poise, the fluid assurance with which she tugged on his heart string. He remarked the tilt of her head as she conducted this ritual, slightly to her left, his right, a lilting tilt as she plunged into his soul, inserted the jack, brought her eyelids together once as she drew in a short breath of air, all prelude to the parting of her lips and . . .

“Allo?”

Again her voice struck him. Again comprehension eluded him. Again he was smitten with affection. Again he completed his routine with the hallowed and mechanical release of the receiver. It dropped the length of its

cord and dangled—the penultimate solution to the problem of culture. He did not notice the irritated, nay *bothered*, yank with which Mimi Goncourt disconnected the jack. Nor did he notice the narrowing of her brow, vexation knit with nettles.

Clem Dinning offered Ed the scope again, and another lesson. Another lesson. There were so many parts to the infernal machine and more adjustments than one could imagine. It made no sense *at all*. Tighten one screw and a tree jumps three feet to the right. *This*, thought Ed, was what Saphead Sapir should have seen as the sacrifice to civilization—the measuring of the town—a map could be drawn in a hundred ways, each a function of one tiny adjustment; the vertical circle had a tangent screw, a zero adjustment, a spring box, and a horizontal axis adjuster. Of course the precise correlation of nature and number assumed that all the plates were screwed on tight, that the centering clamp was adjusted, and that the upper plate tangent screw, the lower tangent screw, and the leveling screw were all twisted to some approximation, but of what? It was enough that Ed knew which screw was which and, a baffling thought this, that he knew their names despite Dumfries' squiggles in the sand. So much depended on a steady tripod—were all the legs extended to equal lengths? Were they sitting on level ground? Screw up any of these and you get a different measurement—Main Street might run through Hoving's Hardware, or the sewer might run through city hall. His head ached. He had a sneaking suspicion that Dumfries was to blame.

Ed set the tripod over the stake he had driven into the street the day before. He shuffled the legs of the tripod until the plumb bob hung a bare inch above the stake. The plumb bob hung menacing and nocent on its thread—an amulet, a charm, a fetish both warding off and embodying evil. The ancient surveyors were shamans with their weighted strings, staffs, and water levels. Ed was a shaman. A technological shaman.

Clem Dinning walked backwards, unfolding the chain link by link as he moved one hundred feet from Ed. He tugged it to its full length, and then held the staff. Ed eyed the eyepiece to look through the centuries to the pyramids, the Parthenon.

Not only were they insuring that the road and the sewer would not veer from their appointed paths, they were also straightening the world.

Main Street, and, consequently, the rest of the streets in town, had little curves, veerings, bumps, imperfections. The mayor, the city council, the surveyor, and everyone else, were bent on straightening everything to perfection. The road to Rome could not be squared with their right angles, of course, as it cut through the streets at a variance of nearly thirty degrees. Nor, of course, could the river road be reconciled with their projections. That is, at least, not without a bit of dredging and fill. So, the issue was not that it couldn't be reconciled, but that it wouldn't, considering the cost. . . .

Ed looked through the cross hairs at the surveyor and his staff. Something was odd and jarred him out of the past. The cross hairs themselves weren't straight—what had been two vertical lines side by side, with three horizontals equally dividing the space, what had been a rigid and primitive drawing of an insect scored into the glass, was no more. The verticals were all right, he supposed. They lined up quite well with the surveyor. But the horizontals were not right at all. They positively sagged! Ed removed his eye from the eyepiece and blinked. The surveyor called out for him to be sure that the lines were lining up with the hash marks on the staff. He looked again through glass and adjusted the verticals to the staff, but again, or still, the horizontals sagged. Had he broken the scope? But how? What could he say to the surveyor who was pointing to the hash marks on the staff, hash marks he was to align with the now drooping lines? It was as if the world had gone momentarily soft on him.

Dinning confirmed the problem.

"Main Street would be fit for roller coasters on this accounting," he said, eye to the scope, as if it were the most ordinary problem in the world. He began unscrewing one end of the barrel and removed the ring that held the hairs.

He scraped away at the ring with his fingernail.

"Go find me a forked stick and a spider."

Ed sat back on his heels. A stick and a spider?

The surveyor repeated his instructions and sent Ed off to Hoving's Hardware. After a brief and baffling consultation with Hoving in which they puzzled over the surveyor's request, Ed was shown to the basement. He crept down the stairs, a jar in hand, stalking the unseen spiders.

Hoving was right, he did keep a clean ship, sweeping not only the floors, but the walls once a week. Even so, Ed could see traces of webs between the joists. 'Even so,' he muttered, testing, tasting, and spitting it

out, as he retrieved the step ladder and began his search in earnest. The first web was obviously abandoned. It fluttered lazily when he blew on it. Two or three feet further down, however, he saw something more promising. He descended the ladder, aligned it with the joists with all the technical mastery his precise work with the theodolite had required. He remounted the ladder.

He blew softly on the web and found it intact. The rippling gossamer also revealed the spider, though not as he had expected it too. He had thought, a thought barely articulated, that the gentle disturbance caused by his breath would simulate the disturbance a fly might make. The spider, so alerted to his dinner, would dash out to secure the fly. Such was his plan. Instead, he saw the spider retreat. In his wonder, he impaled himself on a nail. Even so, Ed quickly jarred the creature.

He emerged from the basement as if from a battle—glorious and triumphant. His hair was covered with cobwebs as if he had fought a dozen spiders each larger than life. More serious was the puncture in his head from one of the numerous nails protruding at odd angles though the floorboards as if a carpenter had gone insane while installing the underflooring. The nail that caught him unaware had scraped a bit of his hair right out of his head and held it as a trophy. Even so, the spider sat in the jar, its legs, like the nails, at all angles but drawn to its body much as his telephone girl sat behind her glass, cords drawn and waving as she made her connections, disconnections. Greatly *so?* Ed was disconcerted. Dinning barely looked into the jar before sending Ed off for the forked stick.

“Watch carefully,” said the surveyor when Ed returned. “This is something you’ll want to know.”

He poked the stick into the open jar and pushed it about a bit until the spider climbed on one of the forked ends. He withdrew the stick and held it still so the spider could get its bearings. Then, ever so gently, Dinning jiggled the stick. It was a perverted sort of water witching. The spider dropped toward the ground, hanging by its thread. Dinning squatted, the spider dangled, Ed sat openmouthed and silent. As Dinning began to slowly twist the stick, the spider slowly spun his thread. He twisted such that the thread was taunt and wound about the fork, two, three, four times around the tines. The spider continued to spin, hovering, stationary, a full foot from the ground until the surveyor broke the thread. The spider dropped.

“That ought to do it,” he said, and rummaged through his case with

his free hand. He removed a small jar of shellac. He fit one of the threads to the hash marks on the diaphragm and applied a small drop of shellac to secure it. He repeated the process for the other two sets of hash marks, an odd and abominated web weaving. The shellac dried, he returned the ring to the scope and satisfied himself that his work was neatly done with a long and steady look through the lens.

Ed searched for the spider, but it was gone.

Quitting time. They stowed the equipment in Dinning's truck. Dinning drove off, past the hardware store, past the hotel, dust rising and filling the street as he turned onto the road to Rome. The sun still hung above the buildings and cast its glare on Kesling's Dry Goods, The Homer *Ode*, and Homer Telephone & Telegraph. Ed could barely see the lettering with the glare, let alone what those windows displayed. He shuffled into the sun, west, homeward, and as he scuffed, he kicked a piece of quartz, rounded by the river, covered in the dirt of Main Street, and just about the size of the plumb bob. He shuffled, scuffed, and kicked at the quartz. Semi-precious silicon dioxide, Dumfries would have said. Liable to hexagonal fissures. Talismanic. Ed wasn't sure what *he* would have said as the quartz wrapped itself into his thoughts, its fissures entangled in webs and bits of string and water levels and water mains and the straightening of Main Street and the streets of Homer. Rock. String. Water. His thoughts stymied by connections. Disconnections.

He stood opposite Homer Telephone & Telegraph. His telephone girl sat behind her glass in the center of a tangle of wires. The wires were their own gross abomination of a web, though markedly different from the calculated parallels woven by the surveyor or the jagged hexagons buried in the quartz. The wired snarl surrounding his telephone girl was without order, as through the spider were drunk, or insane, or patterning its web on the flight of flies.

Then the unconscious enactment of a vague idea, born not of his brain, not of his back, not of his feet, but of his hand. His hand recognized the mineral in ways unimaginable to his brain or back or feet, and he bent to pick it from the ground, to cradle it in his palm, fingers curled, coiled. A dawning. Not a eureka, but the slow creeping recognition of a neural pattern, like the gradual rise of the sun, presaged by the shift of color, from

murky blue black, to hazy blue green, to the rosy glow in the eastern sky. Rose quartz. His hand hefted its weight. His fingers squeezed before they released it to the sky.

It soared. *Greatly* so. Without his having projected an azimuthal. It soared. *Slowly* so. Without a hitch or a hesitation, it bridged each half distance, connected one moment with the next, spanned the infinite. It soared. *Lazily* so. Without a care, it drifted toward the only wonder of the world. It peaked. Water. Rock. String. Sun and stars righted in the alignment of the cosmos. It fell. A stupendous crash.

Time begins anew.

In the first moment, a hundred fractures race through the plate glass, a hundred threads connecting, the alphabetic HT&T obliterated by the ever-conjoining, all-communicating fissures, a God-like spider weaving the world in an instant.

In the second moment, a thousand threads disconnecting, an explosive starburst of glass, the fabric of the world rent.

She twists in her chair. Startled. Stunned. Her mouth a frozen 'Allo.' Her brows knit. Her ears, her eyes, her mind register the incomprehension so familiar to Ed. He raises his hand, upright and open and empty, his palm to her in a tentative wave, his palm to her to connect his own inutterable incomprehension, his affection, to connect in the simple gesture of the hand. The telephone girl, his telephone girl, raises her own hand in an expression already tied to the beginnings of a smile.

The Judgment

Butternuts are dropping from the branches
the wind is thrashing this dead November.
Sky under my window white, empty

down to the ground, sky at the root,
sky in the clenching grasses, raining
dark green butternuts into the earth.

On the green landing, at the turn of the stair,
forbidden to come down, I make day
at the window. Hidden inside the drapes,

their swelling folds, their oak leaf pattern
like open hands with veins and small creases,
self-shrouded, I watch wind flay the trees.

Her palm raised to strike. Do not come down
again today or let me see you. Do not cross
my sight, she said, to save me

from punishment, to keep herself
from hurting me. Mad child that I was,
did I want to make her hurt me?

The tree is wildly drumming its branches,
like something trying to get free of itself.
Like an error to be shaken off. My arm hurts,

the burned patch reddens. Leaned against
the window's chill, the raw flesh shines.
She screamed and spun in fury; boiling

water splashed over the pan, splattering
down—my fault, my error in surprising her.
Again my error, irrevocable. . . .

The wind is tearing down the butternuts;
they pound the earth like someone kicking
at a door. Some split open when they hit,

the ridged seed hard and black inside,
the oily flesh ripped loose. They fall
into the earth and sink under the leaves.

The print of her fingers on my cheek:
a scald. *Damn you! Damn you!* she cried,
and I felt the air ignite. I want to go

and hide under the tangled grass
and shrivel to a seed as hard as wood, to let
the hurt flesh wither and fall from my bones.

I want to be flung down by the wind, to lie
on the wet ground under leaves and sink
into the earth and find that deepest hell.

Bomb Test Site, Nine Years Later

*More may come, more may come,
who knows what more may come.
—Them*

1955, New Mexico Desert

The plane is otherworldly, a pterodactyl
groaning, too heavy for flight. The trees are still and spiky
as if molded for a diorama of the Holy Land or
“Life at the Beginning of Time.” A small girl wanders
the desert floor; she is blind and does not answer
or blink her eyes or flinch from any touch.

The trailer is ripped like paper,
aluminum torn and shredded—a hand, a claw, a wind,
one unrecognizable print uncovered in the sand,
then a whistling noise, unearthly, high,
and a great sandstorm descending.

Gramps Johnson’s General Store is demolished;
wind screams through the broken doors.
A radio plays in an empty room.
Spilled sugar covers the storeroom floor.
Everything indicates a homicidal maniac!
Then that whistling sound again, distant at first.
The scared policeman’s eyes show white
when he steps outside to see.

In swirl of sand, the shriek arcs high, pains
the ears, shredding sense. The giant ant
comes up behind him, slow, waving
antennae to sense the earth. Now a smell
of formic acid, and prophecy made true.

In town the rescued child speaks once:
her single syllable: *Them!* Blind orphan
of her family's massacre, here at the beginning
of what may be the end of time, some force
set free, another world beginning.
In the desert, in the deepest chamber, hidden,
the queen dispenses her hundred thousand eggs.

Fig Honey

White Smock opens up for the Come-go man and his clipboard questions. I'm eased back on the cot and making smoking motions, but they won't give me a real butt, deny me Nehi, mouth harp, all form of simple pleasure. Come-go brings his own stool, leans at me. White Smock takes off the night bucket, then stands, holding up the shadow wall, big fella there to see I don't take a notion and lunge. Looking at Come-go, I wouldn't ever aim to hurt him. He's a fool, but not an enemy. He already caught on I don't care for the silver circle he wanted to listen on my chest with or his touching my wrist leaders for heartbeats. He's given up on looking around in my eyes. Now it's just the questions, White Smock with his guard stick and key dangle listening quiet like a party line sneak.

"Why figs, Raymond?" He wants to catch me off my points, but I know White Smock sneaks into my writing book when they drug me at night, and all I did was write "fig" and draw them by dozens since day before yesterday. The turkey-foot leaves, the winter sticks, ripe fruit weeping juice and mashed ones sinking in the grass. He keeps hoping I'll show him the secret, doesn't call me Runt like my daddy. Tries nice, instead.

No help from me, though, cause I have never even seen the woman they are looking for, not her, not her red-haired head. I had my own head and the Captain's already, so why would I crave after another one?

If I was home, I'd be seeing breezy wind knock the flowers off redbuds we called Judas trees, petals my daddy called Easter snow. I'd hear the turkey hunters down by Swale Creek calling up toms with their bird voice contraptions. Can't fool me, though. Even if the fig tree was cut back to child size for the cold months, it would be limbing out and popping leaves by now like the slow sumac, the cut-off hickory's green twigs. No matter the winter, no matter the rain, they was figs every summer, and the fig tree by the scuppernong arbor was where I saw the snake who is Fig King, all rust and ripe copper braided up thick as a girl child's hair on Sunday. He reared his fang head, and his Y tongue said the dusk hour was his own and first dawn when the dew is still on the roses. Ask Rave.

Young Mr. Ravenel, they call Rave, and me was selling war wood. We'd taken the forge poker white hot and scorched holes in the barn planks from the stack stripped off for rotten. They was only weather wounded a

hornet nest gray and rougher than a cob, but we said it was minié bullet leads stung the holes and put our war wood sign under TOMATOES where our Reb flag is nailed to the chinaball tree. Roadside Enterprise, Rave said. Patriotism. We're selling history. I always agree. We drink Nehi orange fast till our noses bubble.

I tell Come-go how fig leaves were all a lie in the Bible. They have a sap that will make you break out and itch, and Adam and Eveline was too smart to slap scratchy leaves over their own private particulars. That brings on his next question, "Have you ever seen anybody like Eve naked?"

He's a doc and doesn't take me for stupid, but White Smock thinks I'm not trick-wise. You couldn't grow up shadow-to-shadow with old Rave and not know pranking. We have seen plenty womenfolk in birthday suits, so I say he's getting foolish in his age, White Smock, I mean. Rave has disappeared and no more older than me. He's slippery as kin. So it's back to talking turkey figs. I pretend to take a deep puff, watch the ember-tip, fill my lungs, then whisper out the blue pretend smoke, just like Rave.

I say nobody knows why the Son of God cursed that plant till it shriveled. I tell him my people don't net the trees against starlings and grackle birds but get out at dawn in ripening time, touch the sweet ones into the bucket before the birds and suck-bees get busy. The fig juice spells them better than knocked-down apples or peaches gone soft. Figs swell to a split when they're ripe and favor a woman's secret. You can see in, where things begin. Farmers call it the eye, but it's red. We think it's like the Bethlehem star, all dewy. They say eating figs will make you tattle, killing a snake will bring rain. I saw that copperhead slink in the sting weeds under the fig tree's shadow. Rave saw it with me. Its head wasn't a fig shape but more like a wild Indian's spear point all clayish when kicked out by the cutter plow. We could of got the hoe and murdered it for the skin—make a wallet, make a belt—but we knew better.

They say Satan was snaky, the Bible does. We've got Bible everywhichaway you look, Rave and me—the thing itself on the mantel, Darling Baptist pointing its steeple at clouds just round the bend. Over in Uncle Millard's mare field, there's that sign painted red on white: AWAKE! THE SON OF GOD IS COMING. We hope it will slow a traveler now and again so he'll mull over our TOMATOES & WAR WOOD. All the paint red as a peckerwood's head. Red as what Jesus said in the Bible. Devil talks in black just like the people, though. You know the devil, he's on the

picture show package of Red Hots, goaty horns and tail like a snake arrow. White Smock once asked if the devil made me hang that dog.

It was Rave. He found it strayed in the pulpwoods, spindle-skinny and goopy at the eyes. We made a pen from chicken fence and fed him up. A hound will take to cold gravy and biscuits, hambone, pie, but not a sweet potato, not hominy. Rave said the last meal is special, so he smuggled pig guts out of the blood house, said we couldn't keep any wild pet in the winter anyway, how he'd suffer with the frost if we tried to be soft. I knew it. We had a kangaroo court, what Rave named it, and agreed how the brown stray—we called him Spy—was guilty of creeping about to no purpose, sneaking in to know our plans, snooping out our hidden things. Clothesline, catalpa tree, a squeal and flail like you never, as the rope went tight. You know a bent nail prized out of hardwood? That.

White Smock is picking at his fingernails. He's a hard man to interest, especially with tales of beasts and country fruit. Come-go is tuned in, though. I am going on about figs, how sweet they get, like honey on bread, how the seeds are a grist on your tongue, but you can get them between your teeth and pop. They spark. If you're not careful, a fig wasp will bite you. You could swallow it. Some people could die, giving up all life's signs and wonders for fig honey. It was Mama who fretted and warned us over and over, but Daddy said she was caution-bound, and it didn't even save her.

Daddy said women make no sense anyway. "Your mama shouted at me for peeing from the porch into the yard," he'd laugh, "but when I got down and peed from the yard up onto the porch, the old woman's conversation didn't improve." He liked to sit on the co-pilot seat, one without the store-bought circle, of the new moon two-seater dump house in the back just past the crib reading a Perry Mason book from the Salvation Army. Hardly anybody would use that hole, it being homemade, but he favored it. Wasps nesting down in there with all the dook, they saw their light mooned out and rushed up, mad as a Methodist. Daddy rushed too, bit bad, and he went real sick. He said it's why he couldn't make me brothers, the way wasps got him in the bag. Fig bag, almost, you know. At least I had Rave.

The Captain's head is why we were honest to sell war wood. Butcher Sherman's flank like a dark wing swept over Spalding County, ripping up rails, stealing silver and harness, burning houses and cows. Rapine, they

called it, and forage. Fancy words for a no-mercy raid. They skirmished hard at Swale Creek, and stragglers happened on each other right where our apple stumps used to be an orchard. Full moon, they say, winter of sixty-five, club and pistol gun and bayonet, old knives and axes, all the noises of agony and bold pleasure. They left the woods blood-flowered, cur dogs ripping at limbs and faces under the moon. The ground gut-slick. A gaffer wrote in the paper that he was a child then and saw a Yankee blown into a tree like Christ Man, a redbird perched with a man's eye in its beak, half-hearted woodfires here and yon. That's why Redbird, Georgia, just around the river bend.

Mama's people buried them all in a heap down in the draw where ground was soft. Family talk said one fella from Mississippi was Captain Bowers, and he fell. Ghost everybody sees lurking at the end of winter we always called Captain, and when I was digging for gold behind the barbecue chimney, we found his head bone all smutty with dirt, no teeth, a genuine bullet hole in the head. It made Rave dance to see it. They say ragged volleys hit the barn, so for years we had the cold ghost smell of Captain Bowers and minié balls in the planks, but that barn went off stick by stick long before I was born. We had to make our own souvenirs: poker point and fire equals bullet hole. Why not? My people earned it, like a brand.

If that missing woman stopped to buy a sack of tomatoes or figs in a wove basket and had an Eve smile, it was Rave, not me, that was watching the stand, making change, smoking Chesterfields. Rave didn't have an extra head like mine. I kept the Captain in my attic sack with harlot magazines and Daddy's straight razor, all my keepsake pretties. I liked to pick him up and play toss with myself, nobody else but the perch owl to know my game. He was a hero. I played with his skull like some heathen in the Bible. Rave would chase it through the rye grass. He knew how to covet, but I could make him hush. I think Rave could of been river people, too, but he just showed up with no warning, no history. He could of had a horse and a boat and a bentwood rocker with a crazy aunt chained in the basement. If I was him, that's what I'd say.

This time of year, blossom time, I'd sweat the days putting in rows, stringing for beans, rive-shingling the barn. After dinner, I'd be out with the butterfly net catching carpenter bees that lived behind the soffit and aimed to gnaw our cedar house to dust. It was a game dance and with stump-water whiskey. You have to stand still as a dead man with the hoop aimed at a

place in the air, then wait for one to bumble along. They'd skeeter about and dart, you couldn't catch one, but if it got curious and hummer-hovered to study you, its black and yellow fur a gem bead burning, then you could sweep quick as an angel's wing and snare it, then step on the net. Crunch, like a chicken bone. When they're out, sawing like a lumber mill, you know the fig leaves will follow directly. Fig tree's got no real flowers to signal, but when the fruits come in, they're green, hard as a knuckle.

"Did your mother put up the figs with sugar, make preserves for your biscuits?" Come-go wants to know for his clipboard. "How did you feel about your mother?" I told him that was the best breakfast treat on a hoe cake or cathead biscuit, the drool of syrup with skin bits and seeds tiny as a bug's eye. It's what I miss about her, and she never raised a hand against me. I remember Daddy slapped me once in the sitting room out of the pure blue, then laughed, saying it was palm Sunday. Bray laugh, cackle laugh, snort laugh, howl. He was a whole Noah boat of critters. He stayed for her graveside with the preacher and flowers. I dog if he didn't appear to be sneaking a smile. Then he lit out, took nothing, said no farewell, and who knows where he landed? Maybe Rave. I don't say this last out loud, but just stub out the pretend butt on my pillow. Come-go is giving me the hard eye. I can see he's thinking.

Mama's skin got the sun cancer and went fig color in blotches. The town doctor said too late, said just pain pills, said she should of never worked a field with her coloring unless she could keep on sleeves and a brim hat. Gloves, too. Daddy never shed one tear, then left right after we covered her in the ground. Why did he leave the hammer tool with blood spots under the porch steps. I think Rave knows, but not me.

White Smock clears his gullet, then speaks up in his voice like a mill grinding coffee, "You know we found it, the woman's body dug into creek mud like a crawdad's business, but no head. Right near your tire swing. Wasn't any Civil War mischief," but Come-go calls for him to shush, and then he straightens his back, gives me the cold voice: Own up, Ray, or face the torture of your own guilt. I say, ask Rave for the noggin. I didn't need an extra. I have Captain Ghost, Captain History. I liked to kick it across the chicken yard while the peacock on the roof like a moon fanned open his spooky flowers with preacher's eyes. I never saw that woman and can't snitch on Rave, no matter how many figs I eat, or Nehis, or smokes. White Smock says there was a blacksnake all licorice-like on the asphalt this

morning and smeared from tires, says he has also heard a sour hound moaning the distance at evening. He says everybody wonders will I drown next time the Heavenly Lord makes it rain.

Come-go is writing on his yellow paper. The ink pen makes a scrapey sound. I say you can't have real bliss without real tobacco. He won't look at me now. I scratch a make-believe Bluetip on my coveralls to light up another Chesterfield filter tip and blow smoke rings at the ceiling, then lay back, acting like a red-headed woman's face off in the burdock smiling painful at Rave.

Now That You Have a Cat We Can Be Lovers

On the first cold day
after Indian summer's
wrapped around our shoulders,

I arrive at your new apartment
reaching down to pet your cat.
He's both smooth and rough

the way I imagine you might feel—
like a patchwork Navajo rug
thrown across the hills,

the ends of leaves
tied upon the trees,
held on by knots and snags.

Perhaps Navajo time
has caught us in a circle:
you're home again

and though your cat's tongue
rasps upon my hand,
I think this time we'll change.

How cat breath beckons
in the small, warm kitchen.
A pet means commitment

to a place, even this bare wood hallway,
where he runs his paws
beneath each door.

And every time I lift him,
claws invisible and slim
as wires of November rain
dig gently in.

Sabbatical

Here in this desert's only house, our dome,
at night, my father sits me down before
a giant telescope, and says, *Look in that glass.*
Peering into a dime-sized hole, I can't

see anything. I hear him step around
the great machine. *Look now.* He flips
a hidden switch; a black cloth falls away
suddenly to show the universe rushing

to get a better look at me. I hold
my breath, poised not to scare the galaxy off.
Skittish, it kicks a million stars falling,
although they disappear before they land.

I hope you like it here, my father says.

We'll be staying a year, you know.

Last week, he signed me out of school where all
the other boys ran faster, hit balls farther,

and jumped higher than I did. But now I live
inside a castle where sky bends down to me.
Back home, the boys chase one another around
the old baseball diamond behind the gym,

day after day. They'll never see I'm gone.

Proximity

You don't notice it at first (you never do); it comes
with the breath of leaves, and body heat, steam of children,
playing, throwing the ball back and forth, and backing further
and further away from each other, laughing into milky distances
as the air turns cold, physical, combines with warmer air. So that
when the distance becomes only something to be thrown into, to enter,
and then

step out of again like a dancer emerging from a curtain
or back behind a held fan

or a bird passing into and out of what could be smoke
or time or loss of its own accord, it seems perfectly natural to stand
stock-still and watch

and be consumed with a new
condition you've

adapted to

without thinking

of (how long has it been since we thought
of) bodies danced into distance and the bird that was
a ball thrown

endlessly somewhere in the highest reaches of a lost tree

and you standing in the middle of the road beneath it staring
waiting,

calling

with everything you have

come back

come back

Broken

There are times of course when things are broken beyond repair. Broken by old stones, by new foundations it runs against, the crack it runs through, the stream cannot find itself again. And the wind—branch-bitten, star-stunned—cannot get going, can't build the way wind builds upon itself as it comes off wave tops or treetops or through the long barrel of the valley, full bore and thrumming—so drifts, dissipates to a rattling wheeze

so much like that old
Thunderbird on cinder block across the street, which no amount of sweat or sealant or curses and back-break of a neighbor will save, will make engine oils, coolants, transmission fluids stop seeping out to run in pools in the small space where pavement meets gravel and the engine coughs over and over.

For weeks now he
has worked out there, jeans drooping, ass in air,
polishing, wrenching, grunting, stopping only to run
the hose over his peeling neck and meaty shoulders, tell
the dog to shut up, to stop chewing the toys in the yard,
which are also broken—some by neglect of years, some
smashed in anger.

So now each morning comes to us
with hammer and clang and Oldies 103, the radio being
the only thing in the car that works. So Elvis,

Buddy Holly, Jan and Dean, The Marvellettes sing
in the spaces where we once heard *ghost in the graveyard*,
London bridge, the rhythmic thwack of rope on stone,
patter of small feet, and the soft shouting of screened in
porches saying, *I've shut my trap for years and now . . . now*

he picks up another rusted piece of metal beneath
the chassis that for years has been working its way down
and out of the engine, and though he's studied the guts
of it, read and re-read the manual, he
has no idea where it came from, what it is that stains

our fingers red—a once-hard thing entering
the hands, broken
as dust.

The Heat of What Comes

I remember one winter

the wind coming full bore off Misquamicut
so the plate-glass hummed with it, and I thought
I felt the house shudder free of its mooring and drift
for days of heavy snow and rain. So I knew, when
I went walking or lay in bed awake, that it was all

different. And always like this. The town ripped
from its foundation, sliding and slipping over a deep

and unknown sea. That was a long way back, and I
only remembered it just now. But now it changes

everything. It found me.

As in a symphony: once you've heard it, the change:
the choral part: that oboe, or tonal color lurks from

the start like a small animal on the edge of your
porch-light—the way Mozart's burial in a mass grave

lurks in his Requiem. In the Don. In Figaro. In the first
moment his father handed him a violin. Waiting
for him, for us, to find it. And I know how fire kindled
in the peat of old forests can burn beneath the ground
for weeks without anyone knowing. Only the scent
of burning and the fox feeling it beneath her feet: warm

and humming—and dangerous
our fingers red—a once-hard thing entering
the hands, broken
as dust.

From *Instants Incertitudes*

ix

This other
me
has gently
detached itself

It walks
several paces
in front

Already so far away
I don't know
how to recapture it

Independently
amiably
it turns round

I don't recognize us

x

Chalky white tooth
the cliff
bites the sky

The sea decays
the root

xiii

Sky
of rock
salt

Meadow
crunching
under frost

A roan horse
warms the eye

xxxii

Drop by drop
rain ends

Life suspended
before the death throes

Gentle slowing down
intervals
where melancholy
condenses

A drop
the last

Silence

No
dying
cannot be
so simple

Translated from the French by Bea Mahood