

apricot pages

ALSO BY JOHN HALL

Between the Cities (1968)

Days (1972)

Meaning Insomnia (1978)

Malo-Lactic Ferment (1978)

Couch Grass (1978)

Repressed Intimations (1981)

else here (1999)

apricot
pages

a brief textual adventure

John Hall



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These pages were begun some time in the middle 1970s. Some of them appeared in specialist magazines of the time. In about 1984 they were prepared for publication and were about to appear from Grosseteste Press as the *Little Grey Code Book*. In the event Grosseteste stopped publishing and there were other things to think about. The text lay in a file, being shown every now and again to individual readers who showed an interest.

PAGE NINE

The use of the heater is quite simple. Or so was claimed for it in the instruction manual. The single round knob beside the grille acts as a rheostat which controls the speed of the fan (Its *rotational velocity* the first writer of the manual had said).

Rheostat, Francie spat to herself, that's a fancy word. It sounds like the phrase Clifford always uses when he's asked what line he's in. Real Estate, she finally got out of him but only after she had persuaded him to PLEASE SLOW DOWN. What's the hurry? REAL, she said. Clifford will you please slow down.

The heater would not work for Francie any more than for Clifford. Where's your rheostat, Clifford? I'm going to turn it down. Giving his scrotal sac a faint twist anti-clockwise in her imagination.

No work could get done that night though the citizens of Judhael's town of Totnes were more fortunate. There the milder weather and the nature of the local industry (each woman, someone had told Francie, stooped over raw buffalo hide, kneading it, and only at night) precluded the use of heaters of quite this kind.

She tweaked the label still in place on the matt black handle. It was torn. She read, Are you getting all the warmth you deserve? Women of today have too a wonderful variety of..., and there the tear occurred. She kicked it, with a damaging pendular velocity into the wall. The force of popular fiction nearly made it work but not quite. Instead it squatted there, a singular concavity in its shiny grille, an alert uselessness about its angle of posture. She kicked it again – from the ankle, this time, a flick of the foot. It rose up against the wall and dropped again silently.

Hegel said that the Roman state was the prose of the world. The wealthy within that state were warm, making use of cunning systems of underfloor heating. Recent far-reaching discoveries in the biological sciences have raised no proposals for tackling the problem of cold radically, tackling it at the level of the body's primal metabolism. So far as Francie knew, no major work had been done in this field; neither by the Romans, nor by their successors the English, nor even by the Americans.

She turned dispiritedly to her dressing table and to keep her mind off the cold fiddled with the wonderful variety of cosmetics that, variously contained, crowded its top surface. And there leaning up against the unopened bottle of Lanvin's Arpege that Mr Tibbet had given her eighteen months before was the mail she hadn't dared open.

She did so now.

First was a card from her cousin Judhael in Totnes. The little bitch, hissed Francie to herself. It showed a picture of a young woman, looking wonderfully like Francie, stooped over something resembling raw buffalo hide. Underneath was a caption reading, Women of today have, too, a wonderful variety of occupations. Mark Tibbet (Mayor).

Mayor, mouthed Francie. Buffalo mare's piss.

The next two letters she couldn't read because they were of a different language. The third she felt between the first two fingers and thumb of each hand. She looked into space. No, she said quietly and put it down.

The next said, Please come round soon. I need you. Mark. She was about to throw that down when she saw on the back, PS Please come wearing Lanvin's Arpege. I'd be grateful and, in time, so would you be. Hmph, said Francie, intrigued despite herself.

The next card was as simple as the heater to use. In clear blue print it was headed, The New Woman's Ethical League (affiliated to the Council for the Use of Normal Thinking). In mauve ink its message read, There is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers. Francie opened her underwear drawer and pulled out a half-bottle of Teachers from beside her first edition of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. She took a slug, a long one. No work could get done that night, that was for sure, especially as the last envelope frightened her most. It was huge. She slit it open with a long eye-liner brush and slipped out a heavy concertinad card. On the front in clear blue ink was printed, ... far reaching discoveries in the biological sciences. She opened it out with shaking hand. There were eight photographs of men she knew well. All of them are there except Clifford, my darling rheostat. Lance, Henry, Charles, Edwin, Anthony, Cedric, Sidney and Lance. All of them in the last two months had expressed LOVE but their features in the photograph were vicious. In the first square, instead of a photo, were the words, Each of us liked you (Liked: That hurt her.) and on the last square were the words, And where are we now?

Francie swallowed more of the Teachers. It is strange how much I need them now. She threw herself down on the bed, her whisky breath in the pillow. Oh God: only Clifford and Mr Tibbet. Muffled through her pillow she heard the telephone ring. She clutched the bedclothes tightly until it stopped. Then she fell shaking asleep.

The next morning she would drive up to Mr Tibbet's place.

PAGE TEN

Voices from the past, from the future. She turned in bed, alone, and was helpless. Each of us like you. Faces in photographs monotonously paraded across her nightmare screen, entering on blurred left, passing through a horrible clearness, on their way to blurred right. Her eyes beneath their lids flicked left each time for the next.

Each of us like you. At the same time the words kept flickering and jumping. In her torn sleep she tried to control them. The images are clear. Why do the words jump? It was as though, if she could get past these, other words would follow, more kindly to her rest. It's a terrible affliction. Two screens, like a viewing of *Chelsea Girls*, though the drama here is personal. Outside, light began to press against the thick drawn curtains. When in the narrative had she drawn her curtains? The café entertainment stopped as dawn broke and below her window the musicians headed for home, a Lance among them. For aubade he gave her a blare on bass clarinet, at which she started in her dreams.

And into her room, while she dreamt, a boy entered, with an innocence beyond her horror. He replaced the cap on the Teacher's bottle. He took the unopened envelope from the dressing table. He drew the bed-cover from either side of Francie and tried to tuck it around her. He thought she shivered in her sleep. The cheek which he touched gently with the back of one hand was not cold but hot and wet.

One, two, three, four, five, six, the boy heard her say in racked voice. This was Arnold, her boyish aubade. As he touched her again her word-lock broke. Or did it? Each of us like you. No. But then by force of her dreaming will, a comma entered, compounding the fault in her memory: Each of us, like you.

The photographs blurred out completely as the words took centre: Each of us, like you.

Now there was no movement, but great fixity. She must add: Each of us, like you ... it's a terrible affliction. The boy saw her weep and smile, saw her mouth work and the sound issue, It's a terrible affliction. Under the influence of the new weeping smile, Lance's brother, Arnold, who adored her, tip-toed to the window and drew back the curtain the width of his head. There was lachrymose film in his own eyes as he looked out into the provincial morning. He muttered something there as the light passed him and turned hurriedly to Francie, for he loved her, and nearly spoke, but stopped at once when he saw her face on which now misery was again depicted. These are my first critical essays, he thought with grim pride.

Voices from the past, from the future. In that misery Francie awoke. Arnold!

PAGE ELEVEN

The idea that life arose from time to time from non-living materials – oh yes, like Clifford’s shiny heater in its newfangledness. The study of perception could only teach us a ‘bad ambiguity’. She had come back so often to that thought, which one of them – probably Edwin – had printed out and stuck to the wall at eye-height in the mauve loo. Later one of the others – and again she had to guess it was Cedric – had added: The terrible affliction. Below that in a different hand (Edwin again? ah crash on crash of great names): The risk. Underneath it all she herself had written, in a garish lipstick she had no more use for: Let me alone.

Few women came to her flat and few men sat on her loo. It was she who had to endure the words. She was aware, of course, of an ambiguity about the word ‘could’, its conditional quality, with spurious connotations of past aptness. Her sister Bess, on one of her visits to town, had shown her this. Look! she had shouted from the loo and Francie had just said, If you mean the Sign, I know. But it crackles and drops like the fire.

And Bessie was nearly always right, bless her. She reminded her sister of something it was often pleasanter to forget: the landscape near an aerodrome. To security? No – there is no time left for that. But its opposite. Not her own insecurity, which Arnold knows is real enough. Real: Rheol. A flowing insecurity. But Bess’s – a – um beautiful natural base-zone for unpredictable travel. This tickled Bess, mildly exasperating her. What fake ambiguity? Willed insecurity. That journey is unpredictable only to the hi-jacked and those who don’t read the time-table. But in your case life arose from that landscape. That langue-scape, said Bess. My arse!

PAGE TWELVE

She drove out with Bess but not to the airport. No matter what, she just couldn't steer the Herald in that direction. Bess laughed, understanding. Why not Battersea Park, she said, invoking a sisterly joke of their teenage past. Near tears, Francie managed a snort that was nearly a laugh. That comedy of errors dolorously dedicated to the ageing of our mum, she thought, but not aloud, this. I wonder if she ever understood, she did say. Who? asked Bess. Our mum, of course. What? The comedy of errors. I don't follow you. Weren't you listening? You weren't talking. Francie looked blank. Are these the errors you mean? Bess asked, gesturing at the space of misunderstanding between them. Francie just looked blank. How can I, she said, with all my family... Go on, said Bess, I mean... Francie's driving now mechanical: either she in command at a sensory-motor level quite beneath her felt turmoil or the Herald itself in command, gliding the two sisters over the black road into the hills, carrying them just ahead of the random projectiles their feelings were. At least this may be true of Francie and the car. After all, it was her car, an intimacy rather than possessiveness of two years now. Its engine buzz passed into the sound of breathing in her senses not Bess's. For Bess it was all a very mild irritant. Francie was of course in the driving seat.

As so often the rhythms of a motor-car engine intercepted a blank conversation. The two women sitting blankly forward now stared straight ahead and 'ahead' is a word hovering between adverb and preposition, leaving them and you in some uncertainty about a noun. It's none of our business except that the two are in many ways what is called attractive. As they sit there Francie pitches some misery to the tune of her engine and her mouth is down at the corners. But it is a full mouth. Even now you can imagine kissing it. I don't

know why this makes a difference but it does. And we are no more voyeurs than Bess, whose eyes are browner than Francie's, who breaks her forward dream to look across at her sister. She smiles, despite Francie's unhappiness and as a result we can't apply the classical distinction of form. Her smile is not cruel but that life continues as the Herald does.

But the Herald didn't for long. Francie began to slow down deliberately and then pulled off on to the springy grass verge. I'm supposed to go to Mr Tibbet, she said when it had stopped, the motor idling. Oh, said Bess. Well, shall I? Why not? said Bess, and of course I'll come with you. That'll scare him. Francie stretched across Bess to the glove compartment where she had in an early set of intentions put the Arpege and Bess watched her as she shook some on to her fingers and then stroked it on to her neck just below the ears. Do you want some? Why not, said Bess, and did the same. I think I'm going to enjoy this. Poor Mark Tibbet!

Hmph! said Francie, who found that she was going to enjoy it too. Though she pursed her lips out – we could say 'in determination' if we were surer of the context – there was a play at the edges.

PAGE THIRTEEN

Mr Tibbet's house was known as The Divided Ways, though he himself had called it Beech Tree House, had intended to call it that ever since buying the site some miles out of town on the north side. You could see why if you looked out through his French windows. Down at the bottom of his garden, set out some of it almost like parkland, was the giant green beech, and in the summer, each summer, when there was a space of green translucency not quite shade under and about its leafage, then Mr Tibbet was completely the family man.

In his main living room, this side the pale translucency of his French windows, there were pictures on the wall, distillations of that summer quality of domestic sensibility that saved Mr Tibbet a great deal of emotional inconvenience during the winter months. There were many who said that this was the secret of his youthfulness, a species of bland smiling gaiety that the elderly women on the north side were touched by as they were meant to be.

Francie called it wealth and imbecility and said it made her sick. We have already guessed that she simplified. She was also impressed despite herself, if that is not to use too simplified a notion of herself. That more acerbic part of her did seem to be quite vociferously sickened by the man's arrogant calm.

But something else in her, that that more acerbic self affectedly despised, was persuaded by the sweeping range of his ignorance. It was that Mr Tibbet fixed his sense of property on a beech tree and it was a very persuasive beech tree as so many of them are; and that he was himself so free from any sense of pain. We are beside Francie as we infer this. Who knows anything about Mr Tibbet's pain unless he gasp or scream? To own a beech tree and garden like parkland is to assert outwards

a necessary sense of personal calm. That is one of the things that wealth means. Sit in the loo in Francie's flat and then stand by the French windows of the Divided Ways.

Continue the argument with the pictures on the walls. Photographs are very simple and can be framed, making a hole like park land in your living room wall. Mark Tibbet, wondering if Francie would come, looked around his walls and Francie would say he felt no guilt or division; that is, he didn't look through the pictures but at them. Another – though possibly contradictory – way of saying this is again that he owned them: a matt glow that came off the surface of one of them, yes, he actually took credit for that. The greater our technical proficiency in art or money the easier it is to own fine feelings. There may be a boundary to this idea but you won't see it through the French windows. Those are framed too and a frame is more a guide than a boundary. I am thinking of the convention in movies that indicates that we are to consider ourselves as looking through binoculars at a chosen object or cluster, often an enemy ship.

In most of the photographs and oil paintings there is a daughter called Anna. Her hair carries all the glow of a summer's fine feelings. On the wall she is fixed at about twelve, occasionally slightly younger. Before that there was not the means to translate her to the walls. After that? That is the same question as who knows where Mrs Tibbet is in the winter? Part of one of the shelves of leather-bound books proved itself, if you were ingenious or persistent, to be a concealed drinks cabinet. The backs of an edition of the works of Washington Irving had been transferred to the door that closed off that section of shelf space. I tell you this as a contribution to speculation on the whereabouts of Mrs Tibbet. Her husband, after all, has a taste for specious concealment.

There are two other girls in the pictures and a boy in a turn-

of-the century sailor's suit. In one there is a Great Dane and three cats. Leaning against Anna's chair is often a butterfly net. Mr Tibbet, in a rush chair, smokes his pipe: a wise man has children such as these.

There is one oil-painting without people. It has been painted directly on to one of the panes of the French windows and is translucent. By sitting in a particular white, high-backed chair you can line up the painting – which is of the tree and the grass beneath it – with the objects it represents. If you do this there is a ghost effect of light like that in Anna's hair where the people in the chairs would be.

It is through these windows that Francie and Bess will enter.

PAGE FOURTEEN

Bess was enjoying herself very much, knowing the assault to Mr Tibbet's sense of territory entering through the garden would probably mean. She inferred this from all the usual signs, not least the area of shade where the small oak gate interrupted the solid mass of a straight and continuous box hedge. You entered the cool and felt some excitement about where the avenued walk might lead you. This was more usually for the purposes of a personal and domestic transformation. Bess imagined that the shrubs concealed loud-speakers and that the owner walked there to the accompaniment of music by Frederick Delius. She imagined the man's head – which she had never seen – slightly bowed in worldly contemplation. He looked to her like the figure she already knew from her reading of the poems of Andrew Marvell.

Was it the head of Anna bobbing behind cream curtains in an upstairs window witnessing the two sisters' presumptuous approach and listening with apricot luminosity to the words and thoughts they were then sharing? And was it her voice in practised boredom shouting through the house: Daddy, I think there are two – um – women breaking in at the French windows? And was it his silence they heard, Mark Tibbet's authoritative incoherence, in reply to this suggestion? At any rate the nothing they heard meant more than that. Bess felt nervous now and opened and closed her right hand, staring at the palm curiously, stretching her fingers and allowing them to curl back spontaneously around the space her hand held. Francis was always nervous but this made her more so. For God's sake, Bess. Remember the perfume as a contradiction to their nervousness and, more strangely, to this room where they now are, planned in ignorance of its effects.

Remember the perfume and that it is in the air and by now

clinging to the books, the drapes, a faint aromatic mist of condensation on the framed photographs, as though the two women – or most likely Bess – had been trying to breathe life into them. And then know that Mr Tibbet has silently arrived in the doorway, has silently turned the recently lubricated handle of the apricot door, and is standing there blankly, distracted beyond his usual repertoire of responses by aerial trespass, by an inter-sensual discord, that is at this stage no more than blank awareness. Mr Tibbet has no vocabulary for the aesthetics of total ambience.

Later Anna, perhaps, will suggest he change the chocolate carpet, certainly repaint the door. Do you think she likes it that when she stands by that door she recedes into it, her apricot and its becoming a single decorative element in yet another frame? Hadn't she stopped loving Henry Waters when he had called his painting of her Apricot Light? It made her feel squishy, and though she did feel squishy when she thought of Henry even now when she no longer loved him – that was a kind of warm inside squishiness. She didn't want everyone to know. But it was Mr Tibbet's house and Mr Tibbet's feelings that had, as you know, the greater financial support, and Mr Tibbet liked that recession that left only her eyes and lips. The apricot lipstick he had given her for Christmas she had never used. The Waters painting was cunningly framed and what you could see were her eyes and lips. Only if, with an intimate lovingness that made the glass mist over, you leant towards the painting, did you see in receding apricot light the fleshy contours of her head. With the light off and a single torch beam illuminating only the image the features become bold and, it is said, erotic.

So Mr Tibbet was used to a mist on some of his paintings and photographs but he knew that this was different. It was he who broke the silence by murmuring, new riddles, partly to himself and partly for effect. Bess thought he had mis-

taken the perfume but perhaps he referred to her, whom he had never met but whom, by a ready family extension, he elected to desire. At any rate he was looking at her as he spoke and the blankness partly left his features, giving way to a faint ashy glow. I might have guessed when I heard the silence it would be yours.

Oh Clifford, Clifford. No, the invocation to the other man was not silent but was delivered in the plaintive tone of one wearily resigning herself to lower standards. Mr Tibbet was dressed against all covert meaning and was therefore immune to the rebuke of Francie's first irony, but the obliquity of reference in the repeated proper name, that hurt him, and his face misted over, as it always did when he sensed threatening behaviour at the boundaries of his emotional territory. Even so, in his soft chocolate coloured carpet slippers and within his own sense of appropriate dignity he approached her in the chair where she had flounced. He stooped to kiss her, with an air he supposed gallant rather than intimate, below the ear. As he stooped he saw only her, her face, her hair, her neck, and the perfume now lost its ambiguity and spoke directly to him.

Bess noticed him stiffen as he passed from overt gallantry into barely repressed lasciviousness. His eyes were closed and he swayed there. If I give him a push, thought Francie. Oh Clifford.

Not against the door, but next to it, Apricot by Apricot, Bess was sure of that, and enjoyed the painting that could be a title to. But the figure next to the door showed no enjoyment. Never more, she said softly. Daddy, I'm off to Buenos Aires.

Caught swaying, Mr Tibbet's face was blank.

PAGE FIFTEEN

The spirit of Anna was on the walls as a very fine mist detectable only in the unevenness and matt glow of the apricot emulsion of the east wall, in which no sun rose but the replicated orients of her more youthful face held steady at let us say 9.00 am in October. There was also, true, a planar residue, a steam-rollered spirit of Anna, held off about a quarter of an inch from the gloss surface of the apricot door. This was enough to keep Mr Tibbet giddy and bowed. He could not look his daughter in her many eyes.

Her cared-for flesh was gone, though, as the rectangle of relative darkness beside the door testified. An idea of Buenos Aires hung there instead, a rival air, and beyond, through the carpeted acoustic, they could hear doors opening and closing and once, when the silence was Mr Tibbet's, they heard the click of the brass suitcase-lock going home. At least Mr Tibbet knew it was brass for he had given her that suitcase – pale yellow in mock leather – as a sign to her that she was to travel now, that she was to consider the garden to include, well why not Buenos Aires? He had carefully not been specific about the expansion of the family's territorial spirit, its spiritual territory.

Until she was gone he was held in suspense and feared desperately. He couldn't call as Francie had just done – Anna, Anna! This was one of those moments of emotional transition most of us back away from – Anna, Anna, let me explain. Preferring as we do in our cowardice to explain, to repair and redecorate the home our feelings used to be. But we don't prepare for the event the way Mr Tibbet had. As Anna leaves we pray for the safety of her flesh. When she is gone we may look to the walls and her spirit – her twelve-year old spirit (this too is important) – can be released and animated by her departure, can steady in her absence.

As she leaves, Mr Tibbet is in suspense and we should pray for him too. Within his rib-cage a fear or desperation is held off as an added stomach lining, but out of time this one. If one thing goes wrong he will be awash with defeat and we will see him collapse. You may wish that but Francie doesn't, so pray for him.

Bess was just white, relaxing. Of course she wasn't. Who could not be aware of what was happening? But in the absence of Anna the relativity of hues had shifted and she seemed white, and she appeared to be relaxing because she was skilled in appearances and any other posture – of concern for example – could have been an intrusion of liberal irrelevance into a rite she sensed was, in some way at least, expected. These are the explanations and you might find yourself admiring Bess for them. Don't let considerations of an illusory frailty influence your feelings by way of her apparent whiteness. Look at her mouth, just at this moment expressive of deliberate inexpressiveness and introduce, but restrain, your own irrelevance. No one here is thinking of kissing her lips. Mr Tibbet, after all, is suspended.

Francie, who had just been kissed, wasn't thinking of that. She felt more like a prisoner brought into the courtroom: the suspense was a trial to her, as was the fixed position of Mark Tibbet's body, just raised a few inches from where he had kissed her. The whole latent weight of his body was on hers and she couldn't shift it. There was no appeal: it was a monumental fact of her immediate life; all her responses were irrelevant too and she was tensed against such an exclusion. How badly she found herself needing a gesture she could repudiate. How stiff she felt under the weight of his paralysis.

PAGE SIXTEEN

Francie didn't know how much time had passed or whether or not she had truly fainted. She knew of a feeling of heaviness, like paralysis, and she knew that she blinked and that apparently in that blink a change had occurred in the tonality of the room: the apricot was altogether more luminous and yellow and the tiny spikes of stubble on Mark Tibbet's chin seemed to receive light from all directions. The whiteness of Bess was less white.

Mark Tibbet's presence was so heavy she wondered if he had died but then she saw his lips move. Death-bed tenderness suddenly suffused her. For a future charm she must know now what his lips mumbled. Her attention was blank with ready sentiment. She allowed the light to concentrate in a halo around his body. Yes, Mark, yes! When love is rescued from time Francie will risk everything. There is a final evil surrounding Mark's love she wishes to relieve him of.

His body blocks from her view the likelihood of his substantial life continuing. From where she sits the house is just light, remember, and it is Bess who has a full view of all his continued claims on the future, who hears a car start and imagines its tyres on gravel, who wonders if you can now drive all the way to Buenos Aires. She tried to listen for the direction of the receding sound: west or east?

As it receded Mark Tibbet unbent himself and stood there, dazed, a blaze of light flaring up the right side of his body. He patted his rib-cage, just to the left of his heart, and then dipped his right hand into the inner breast pocket of his jacket, pulling out a miniature, red, leather-bound note-book.

One late noon-day, sitting at the kitchen table ... he allowed

his gestures and the proffered book to indicate the range of possible endings to his sentence. Anna, he added with only slightly increased lucidity. He turned and handed the book to Bess who walked over with it to Francie, who took it in her left hand and placed her right over it. At last she had found the specific tenderness with which to love Mark Tibbet's incoherence. It was Mark Tibbet she touched with her hands: she knew that it wasn't perfume this time that he gave her, though she, without knowing it, was giving exactly that to him. She opened the little book where a crease in the binding encouraged her to and turned the page sideways to read:

the music in the next room grows loud
while in my loneliness I choke
on social pain and sit here cowed
gusts of laughter come through like smoke.

She could not look up at him after that but kept her head to the open pages in her hand. At first she couldn't find anything else in the book but then, turning back towards the beginning, she found on the first page, in red ink:

Deliver
us
from
evil

On the following page:

evil

a blank

and then, in minute lettering on the next page, on the bottom right-hand corner,

all or white

on the next:

e m

faced with

v o i d

pt y

The same red pen has simply given a faint red border to the two following pages and right across the next two in a yellow-brown watery ink:

NO

DELIVERY

As she leafed through Francie could feel Mark Tibbet receding again, as the blank pages – carefully and deliberately blank she now knew – became eloquent of her added knowledge of the man. She looked at the little note-book in her hand. She stared at it and then turned and stared at all the books in the shelves. Reaching back and across, her hand hesitated, scanning, and then pulled out *The Poems of George Herbert*. The book was two hinged blocks in her hand, the first much slimmer than the other. The only possible opening was to Pages 36 and 37 – The Thanksgiving – “Oh King of grief...” and The Reprisall, whose first stanza Francie read:

I HAVE consider'd it, and finde
There is no dealing with Thy mighty Passion;
For though I die for Thee, I am behind;
My sinnes deserve the condemnation.

Bess, seeing what happened in Francie's hands, went over herself to the bookshelf, while Mr Tibbet watched them, a cold gleam of exultation in his eyes. Leaning over into the gap left by George Herbert was *Tristram Shandy*. Bess, who knew and loved the book, pulled it hurriedly out, wondering where it would be allowed to open. But it opened every-

where, to the white-framed black pages Bess only knew as Pages 41 and 42. She looked up at the others. Mark Tibbet seemed to be willing her to continue. Francie's face was an open blankness that Bess had seen so little since her childhood. Her usual blankness was closed, of course. She held the volume loosely in her left hand, allowing the pages to flop and then flicked them with the thumb and forefinger of her other hand. Once through and the whole book seemed to have the same framed blackness. She looked again at Mr Tibbet, who again wanted her to go on. This time she found a break – some words – just over half way down Page 412:

For my own part, I am resolved never to read any book
but my own, as long as I live.

and another, on Page 356:

All I contend for is, that I am not obliged to set out with a definition of what love is; and as long as I can go on with my story intelligibly, with the help of the word itself, without any other idea to it, than what I have in common with the rest of the world, why should I differ from it a moment before the time?

PAGE SEVENTEEN

Bess was delighted with the abbreviated Tristram. She looked at Tibbet in some amazement. Who'd have thought? she began to say but was silenced by the sternness she received back. For how many years he had prepared for such a conversation without spoken words in a household where he was the only one who ever lifted the books from the shelves. Bess handed the novel to Francie who still had George Herbert in her lap. They both watched her, enjoyed her vacant, silent astonishment. Bess and Mark Tibbet were lovers in this, sharing their pleasure in the other woman. They watched her read very slowly, like a child concentrating too hard. Her mouth almost formed the words and then did. The other two were waiting for this: OF WHAT LOVE IS: Oh yes, it crackles. What love is, Clifford, Lance, Henry. Francie looked up: Arnold knows.

Bess was startled. Arnold knows? Her eyes scanned the shelves at first unsystematically as though a necessary force of coincidence would reveal to her some book of Matthew Arnold's that would resolve this problem; perhaps here was now a complete arcane system that could explain all mysteries. At home, Bess's own books were arranged chronologically, a habit she had acquired in earlier student days when even sorting her shelves had to be an act of self-education. Placing Ben Jonson next to the texts of Shakespeare, John Donne next to Ben Jonson, how instructive that congruence had felt.

In *The Divided Ways* it seemed that the books were arranged primarily by size and secondarily by colour or tone. Arnold could be anywhere, if there at all. The impulse was lost.

Francie was lost too. Bess, we've got to get out of here. She gestured helplessly to the books, the walls, the carpeting. We shouldn't have come. Bess echoed her phrase back at her, giv-

ing it a delayed amplification, a para-lexical variation, of some complexity. Francie's phrase drained of energy, having no curve or cadence, almost abstracted from the breath that produced it: *we shouldn't've come*

Whereas Bess had surplus breath that hissed and steamed through the syllables, creating an outrageous contrast with the silence that followed: *we ssould(n't) 've CA-AHM!*

Bess's knowledge of her sister quickly eroded her disbelief and somewhere in her stomach region she formed the *oh no* that was her device for bringing herself back down from her more excitable expectations. But not before turning to Mr Tibbet, a quick swing of the head and opening of the shoulders releasing a cloud of Arpege that jammed his olfactory receptor area, for a delirious moment making of his entire nervous system a giant nose-nerve. He nearly fainted. He swayed, holding out an arm to steady himself against the recently thickened air.

Your books... I so much wanted to... Perhaps some time? Bess's outgoing breath shunted the Arpege in syllabic puffs towards the nostrils of Mark Tibbet, the final question tone leaving a gently rippling disturbance in the dark hirsute tunnels, so that at first his head went back as though riding late punches and then was still except that a languor lowered his eyelids and he was in upright swoon.

Of course, he managed to answer, I hope you'll come. (Thank you). No sound made the shapes that would have said those words but Mr Tibbet knew for certain that her breath did issue in those precise syllabic shapings.

Francie wasn't even looking but sat there stunned, a blackened *Tristram Shandy* flopped over her left hand, a blockish George Herbert open across her thighs. What love is. Shit,

they heard her say and turned their heads again, he left, she right, to see her.

She stood up slowly then – not so slowly that there wasn't a rustling and eddying of perfume again that made Mark ache for her too, or no, not exactly for her, but for the perfumed mould that had an aerodynamic correspondence to her shape, scaled up by let us say 2 mm all round, though with patches of thermal distortion and other rippling wave movements caused by kinetic disturbances no longer visible. He saw her clothed in Botticellian distorted light, a light entirely odoriferous, so that neither finger nor eyes could finally caress that shape, only the nose of Mark Tibbet. And beside the nose are the softest, most caressive parts of the face, if we except the lips, and these were warm with imagined flesh-odour.

Within this artifice Francie stood coolly and blankly before him. We're going, she said and he nodded. There had been quite enough today. By now where did the tyres of Anna's yellow car make soft contact with tarmac? The purr was distant, redolent with loss, but reassuring.

As they began to leave Bess looked at the shelves again. The texts of Shakespeare? she asked. Another time, said Mark, ushering them back through the French windows by which they had entered.

PAGE EIGHTEEN

Buenos Aires was in Anna's head as an unshakeable conviction, though she didn't know how to get there. Yes, it's true, her world-map of air-routes was a blank now as her little car purred autonomously northwards. It hadn't started a blank: blue seas were scored with ruled lines, converging heavily on London, Paris and New York, but not one of them could be made to extend to Buenos Aires because Anna didn't know exactly where to put it or the name of the country it was in. The South American land-mass grew. She wondered why she needed to know where it was. Here she was travelling North, a south-westerly getting up under the boot and speeding her upwards, for upwards is how she thought of North. All those cars, all those windows, all that conviction of banal destiny. The designer of the road-system had fiendishly determined northwards as the way out.

ALL TRAFFIC. Anna found that breathtaking in its absolute sweep: such a bald summary of varied intent. She wound her window down and shouted into the 55 mph passing air, for the words to be ripped up and bounced off the triple line of curving windscreens all the miles behind her: BUENOS AIRES, ALL TRAFFIC TO BUENOS AIRES.

There was no need to know. Whoever was assigned to prepare the text of her cheque book knew that. She pictured its pages where it couched in her yellow leather hand-bag and imagined a pink rectangle with tiny *~buenos aires~* stamped over and over to create a uniform design not intended to be read. Anna would go to the airport and take out her cheque book. A single to Buenos Aires please. No one would ask her where it was.

Perhaps there would be cloud cover and oblivion. Before her

and behind her (smaller and given a changed perspective in the driving mirror) the lane lines: orderly and margined blackness. Rise into cloud from Heathrow and have its cloudy whiteness all the way above the Atlantic, a dreamy upper sea. Anna smiled to herself imagining the yellowness of her bag in the luggage hold, an intense block of colour – the only one in all the puffy whiteness, Anna the only passenger, her apricot skin radiating a dream Boeing that hummed away above her watery problems. Ah the air she breathed from the nozzle in the roof of the cabin: a jet of the good air, dense in its nebulosity, blowing against her face.

Anna was still travelling northwards and didn't know where Heathrow was. She didn't know where it is. Her little yellow sports car was a single dream along the laned dream-ways and each problem fell away down slip-roads as she passed them like Bristol in the mist. In the back, the way her suitcase made contact with the narrow seat space was full of promise, its inner tender strata both known and not known since on this occasion she had packed for oblivion and gain, as though somebody knowing exactly her size and tastes had prepared her a complete and secret trousseau to bless her into a new life. It was important for Anna not to mention the name of the colour change and in fact she wasn't sure she remembered it correctly. In her mind she could find only layers of beige gauziness as though the entire suitcase was filled with the materials from which tights are made and in its lightness bounced, nearly took off from where its weight actually anchored it.

PAGE NINETEEN

Francie returned to her empty flat as to a proper medium. Arnold's was the only company she could bear the thought of and she wasn't sure even of that. She went to the bedroom and threw herself on the bed – to think, as she phrased it to herself, though it was difficult to see how that activity could do anything but lead her further in to the confusion it was intended to help her escape. She landed, of course, face down – a sobbing rather than a thinking position, so she drew her fist up and clenched it to her teeth. Her neck, head and shoulders made another fist, a tenseness with no one to hit. She was trying not to see yesterday's mail, though the consciousness of the two unopened envelopes was there, slightly humming and throbbing like the after-image of the engine of the Herald, to which, as the tension slackened, her shoulders began to move rhythmically.

She had picked up another letter on the way in, addressed (and not stamped) in the carefully ornate hand of Edwin. She held it tightly now in the hand that was not against her teeth but stiffly beside her body, the wrist pushed into her hip, the fingers upwards. Her forefinger and thumb were squeezed whitely together over the paper's whiteness. An imaginary overhead camera kept reminding her of its presence, giving it a selective significance.

Francie was afraid of it, was afraid now of any possibility of entry. She would unhook the phone later to cut off another possible intrusion of words. It is theoretically possible not to open a letter but if you don't you never know for sure what the enveloped words are up to and feel unsafe until you do. Francie had a hurried, firm-jawed way of opening letters, full of courage but expecting the worst.

Her finger and thumb began to slacken around the envelope as her consciousness began to fix on it as the next thing to deal with. She swung round on to her back, stared blankly upwards briefly, and then hoisted herself up and back into a sitting position, buckling the envelope a little as she did so. She stared ahead now, taking in the dressing table, the still open bottle of Teachers on it, made a little move towards that and then slumped back with a desolately wry shrug. She felt the envelope, which contained not paper but a card, like the one leaning on the bottle-lamp on her bedside table that Edwin had sent her some six months ago. She leant over for it now and re-read it.

For Francine, with Love

Recent rain glistens on the roof tiles
Seen through the closed window from our feather
Bed. We both just lie here with rosy smiles
On our faces, thinking we'll love for ever.
And now and again we kiss, turn and beam
Blissfully. Soon it will be tea-time.
Everyone else is up. Doesn't it seem
Strange? The world outside goes on, a mime

We aren't interested in, joy-tears blurring
Our vision of its silent progress. Fake
Away, world, we're the real ones, occurring
As lovers do, miraculously. Break
Everything we've got, that's all right, our day
Continues and here in our bed we'll stay.

Even now Francie felt warmed and excited by the card: that much love still survived and only by the loss and destruction of the card could it be taken from her. Only one word had ever troubled her in the sonnet and that was 'feather'. They had never slept together in a feather bed and she couldn't for a long time get rid of the niggling suspicion that someone else who did have a feather-bed – whatever that was – had been an earlier recipient of these same lines. Grimly she imagined

identical cards propped up on bedside tables all through this town and the many others that Edwin had passed through. Somehow the feeling that he just wasn't like that didn't help. Who was like what these days? On a thought she licked her index finger and tried it across the word 'Love' in the dedication. The smear from the v and e reassured her but left her immediately regretting this new trace of her suspicion.

She ripped open the new envelope and pulled out a very similar card, holding something in her chest against whatever she might read there. Her hand was shaking.

For Francine, with more Understanding

There's dark beneath your eyes. You've been on the tiles
Again. You can't deny it. Your feather
Step on the stairs fools no one. The neighbours' smiles
Show that they're in the know too. Don't ever
Kid yourself on that score, little moonbeam.
Your innocent look might work at tea-time
On sweet old ladies but to us you seem
Exactly what you are: a tawdry mime

Artist full of pretence. I'm not blurring
The issue this time: a fake is a fake
And when I see the same thing occurring
Night after night it makes me want to break
You into pieces. But day after day
Your smile lasts: your sweet lust is here to stay.

Francie had to breathe slowly around the whole pained area her heart now was. A hardening took place. But that's not fair, she said to the absent Edwin and stared on through the card.

PAGE TWENTY

There were nets. In fear and trembling they descended. Francie could refer to her waking consciousness especially in this: the descent was a descent from her bed, the nets were at a fixed level below her bed so that she and her shadowy companion stooped and ducked, not liking the nets to touch their hair because here and there they were still weighed down with the twitching bodies of fish and everywhere the stench suggested slime, trails of slime held together in sagging grids. So Francie at least kept fearfully low. Her companion probably did too. She was always somewhere to the left and behind. Francie knew that without her she couldn't bear what she was now doing but she knew also that the companion's presence marked a moving place of sorrow, shaped like a person. Her body acquired a slight dragging tilt towards that place. (It is I who has called the companion she.)

Somewhere above her she was aware of that other network of her bed-springs and of the bulges the mattress made between the wires. There was a body in the bed. She could tell from the sag in the middle and the way the sag moved in a restlessness, evidenced more as a bouncing up and down – slowed and absorbed, of course, by the suspension system – than as a sideways shifting. Francie was in that bed and wanted to be in that bed and wanted to rescue the Francie who was in that bed. Pity is painful and helpless. Looking up, that is what Francie felt. From below she knew the heat at the centre, the airy folds of quilt, the light upper air lifting them slightly at the corners of the bed, as though all grace had come, but in the centre of the bed the clammy lower sheet, the sweat and the weight, the pillow scrunched and dampened. From below she ached with pity and became uncertain where her companion was. Though I have said looking up, that is because I hoped you would understand me: she is

looking where she would be looking, given those nets.

But she did try to look up and to see by the glow that seemed to come from the mattress somewhere above. It still wasn't up, of course, but at the facing folds of the nets which were actually ahead of her. There were no fishes now and she found that she could stand more nearly upright. As she did so the nets seemed slung more decoratively and she noticed that there were words on them, squared letters mapped on to the grid of the netting, and apparently written by the addition of a coarser cord. Each fold held a word so that the effect was like a sequence of roadside signs, which make a linear division of the blandishment and are spaced according to an assumption of speed. These just made Francie want to hurry, despite her discomfort. She read:

WHEN THE SERMON IS
GOOD WE NEED NOT
MUCH CONCERN OUR
SELVES WITH THE
PULPIT

And she only read it by stopping and going back. It worried her very much since she was taking everything personally. She felt a consolation from behind but not a contradiction. She felt quite poignantly the lack of any agency of acquittal, only the pained and helpless – and with that somehow dispassionate – pity dragging her round: a quite theoretical pity, the pain generalised. Francie had no particular claims on this companion, she knew that. Perhaps this is why the consolation of another body was not open to her to accept.

LONG TEMPS SUS CULZ LA FORTUNE

She just had time to take in the exceptional orthography of the X and to pass on to La Fortune when it was all lost to her, the crouching, the nets, the stench. The companion was a daylight awareness, a phantom presence somewhere in the air about her. She was on an open road, dazzled by space and cleanliness, by the lack of any need for the road to go anywhere. Off the road to the right she could see a figure, like but not like Edwin. She left the road to go towards him. It was an open, sunny spot, where his restless bright eyes could sweep the lane up and down. He didn't say anything but acted as though he had expected her by making it clear that his vigil was now over, standing up sharply, taking up the easel that had been lying on the ground, pressing the grass to its shape, and walked briskly away from the road, clearly expecting Francie to follow. She did, hurrying to keep just a few yards behind him. They walked on no path but just trampled down the yellowing grass until they came to a stone house that was abruptly there like a house when it is needed in an illustrated children's book. There you are, he said, gesturing at the window.

Inside, Gerald looked into the fire. His thin lips still wore a look of amusement.

Who's Gerald and why has he always been like that? but her new companion laughed – dryly I think it is called, the way clever people laugh when their own cleverness entertains them. Always? he said. Who said anything about Gerald?

PAGE TWENTY ONE

Francie awoke thinking of the dead whose life she felt was much like hers. She was in that state of mind where it is no longer a relief to awake from a nightmare, where the oppressiveness of her dreams became a waking lassitude. Reaching for the cornflakes packet and opening the fridge for milk were activities she had to arouse herself to, as though profound thoughtfulness was a preparation for appropriate muscle tone. The milk, as often as not, wasn't in the fridge but still next to the mat outside her door where the ambient smell – apparently of drying concrete but the landing was always like that and it must be dry by now – seemed to be absorbed into the milk. Francie feared that the milk and cornflakes would set off inside her one day. She had worked out the sequence: a humid warm day so that the setting agent in the concrete would vaporise and then condense around the cool neck of the bottle, dripping off into her cornflakes as she poured the milk; body-heat and peristalsis would see to the rest and as the lump dried it would contract, leaving the scaly edges of the flakes protruding and irritating her stomach lining. Bess had asked her more than once why, if she didn't like cornflakes, she bought them and she had just looked at her as though she spoke of things she didn't understand.

Whenever he could Arnold brought the milk in and put it in the fridge and went through the cupboard to check that Francie hadn't run out of coffee or tea or eggs. He liked to have breakfast with her and it was easy to cross the road and buy everything that was necessary. He was here this morning and the sounds of him in the kitchen entered Francie's thoughts of the dead. When she heard him she felt her body relax a little. She lay still to see if she could feel his kiss on her face, a lip-patch of coolness, on her forehead probably. She knew that Arnold came into her room when she slept

and gave her a boyish kiss by way of aubade and she knew he sometimes watched her for hours while she slept. When she awoke she could usually tell but not at once. She lay on top of the clothes and was still dressed from the previous night. Looking down at her clothed body she thought of Mr Tibbet and shuddered. She thought too of Anna but there was nowhere for Anna – she just kept leaving – and Francie didn't know what to do with that. Ah yes, there it was: Arnold's kiss, up by her hairline. Having placed that, it didn't leave – thought once awakened does not again slumber – and she could see and feel the receipt of his lips.

First she could hear the bacon and then smell it. Its sizzling made her think of the way Arnold ran downstairs and Arnold felt the sizzling was part of him too. The house had stood on a tottering base for a dozen years or more and you could tell that, but there was still scope to act in it with love and vigour. Arnold loved running downstairs knowing that Francie could hear him. He even slammed the door at the bottom for her, yes, quite consciously so, as a demonstration of surplus energy, as though the building might take up the shock vibrations and pass them on to Francie.

The ex-lover's younger brother is a selfless lover who makes sizzling bacon sandwiches – three crisp streaky rashers between thin toast, the top piece buttered on both sides and a fried egg placed on it. The way he loved eating his made Francie enjoy hers. He found mats and cutlery and crockery and laid the table in readiness. Although he knew she was still dressed from the previous night he had his usual anticipation of her coming into the kitchen in her house coat, flushed and rubbery with sleep, billows of body breath and warm air escaping from beneath her coat as she moved, and rising from her as she sat at the table – or not rising but staying where her standing body had been so that in stooping over her to give her her coffee his head entered the clouds and he

re-entered his idea of marriage, which was all morning cat-warmth and in which he himself had not slept but was somehow in all things the receiver and enjoyer of a companion who smelt like Francie and may have been her.

And when Francie came in she was in her house coat and she had washed her face and not made up. His early marriage was perfect.

PAGE TWENTY TWO

Over breakfast a telegram arrived. The GPO motor-cyclist hovered around as though he had a duty to perceive a response to all the messages he impersonally carried or even himself to receive a reply. He could see Arnold behind in the kitchen and Francie in her house coat. He could smell bacon but didn't know that it was the boy who had made it sizzle. Perhaps he did. Thank-you, said Francie absently, as she closed the door on him, leaving the outline of his body as something to guess at through the door. Arnold had been watching closely. Do you know, he said, I've never seen a woman one-of-those.

Francie just shoved the telegram at Arnold for him to open and stood nervously watching. She would have read it anyway but it was a relief to have someone else mediate the revelation: somehow it was easier to be stoical that way. Arnold had never opened a telegram before but was given courage by the responsibility he increasingly felt for Francie's personal life – that is to say, for Francie's life, for it seemed it was all personal. He took a fruit knife out of the table drawer. There's no need to worry, he said, it's a Greetings Telegram. That made Francie feel no better so he slit the heavy envelope and pulled out the form, reading it through first to himself and then hesitatingly, to Francie:

OH CRUELL TIME WHICH TAKES
IN TRUST OUR YOUTH OUR JOYES
AND ALL WE HAVE AND PAYS
US BUT WITH AGE AND DUST
WHO IN THE DARK AND SILENT
GRAVE WHEN WE HAVE WANDRED
ALL OUR WAYES SHUTTS UP
THE STORY OF OUR DAYES

It's from Totnes and it's signed Mark. She reached a hand over for it and read it to herself, She sighed tensely and economically. What can I do? Poor Arnold, but he could give her more coffee and he did, and hope that she would eat her bacon and egg, since he could take that as a pledge to him as well as a sign of equilibrium, but she didn't. The bacon, where it could be seen between the toast, now looked limp. The egg had had a triangle cut out of it which had flooded with yoke that was now cold and wrinkled on the surface. He thought of a job in the GPO which would enable him to cut off all incoming messages.

And while he sought in his mind for that which wasn't to be found the door-bell rang again. This time he too started. A certain vague fear of evil, constitutional in him, had been evoked by the persistence of Francie's nervousness, her dispiritedness. It is not that he had discovered that the thrill of first love passes or that he turned against Francie. She wore her coat of hospitality despite herself: in jumping at the bell he was now with her and less her guardian youth, and this he hadn't foreseen.

But this time she hadn't moved to the door and Arnold knew that he would have to. I don't know why he thought, as he opened the door, that he would see a woman GPO cyclist. She had something in her hand that wasn't a telegram and as soon as the door was open she came in saying, where's Francie?, although she could see, and went towards her and kissed her in sisterly fashion. Arnold didn't know Bess but he recognised that there was more sizzle in the house and he felt swept aside. Francie handed her the telegram and Bess read it, smiling to herself, Well, what's the matter? You don't expect the Post Office to stick to the lines, do you? And taking some sellotape from her bag (What preparedness: thought Arnold enviously) Bess stuck the telegram to the wall and stood back from it again. That's nice. She also ripped

two months off the Scenic South West Calendar that Francie hadn't noticed pass. Come on, get dressed, I'm worried about that Apricot Girl. And then she turned and smiled inclusively at Arnold, who felt nervous about being included. She picked up Francie's unfinished breakfast sandwich as though she needed it and had every right to do so. After one mouthful Arnold saw her sprinkle pepper and salt on the top and open it up to smear mustard (his mustard! He had bought the powder and mixed it for Francie and Francie hadn't touched it.) in the middle. He admired her gusto but was confused: he seemed to be made irrelevant by it. It's good, she said, acknowledging the author.

PAGE TWENTY THREE

Where is Anna? Parents and older lovers know the concern. It is not so much *where* she is as *when* she is: a night has passed and night is the sleeping time of minors. When running away fatigue seizes us even though we want to keep moving. For Mr Tibbet, thinking about his daughter, there came a memory of extreme physical unfitness. The event was lost but he had himself as a boy running from a fear larger than himself, his lungs and muscles giving up on him, his breath in particular very painful, so that there came a moment of total surrender – Oh, I can't.

It might have been a dream, yes his sleep uneasy for many days afterwards. Perhaps because it was a dream – if it was a dream – he could only recall the moment of surrender as a lapse into indifference. Now that he didn't know what had happened he cared, but then, oh I don't care. What had happened? Mark Tibbet shuddered. Somehow his own youthful indifference had made the endurance of pain possible by the achievement of an ignorance of it. Dream or not, he could at least realise he was grateful.

But for Anna, how much he wanted for her an awareness of pain, a quality of heroic difference which kept saying NO. He tracked her in his bed by way of her yellow suitcase. Her bedroom was so empty and I regret to say some of his narratives included accidents, others an elderly stranger, a kind man who looked like Cary Grant. The pain he felt then. The house was so empty. And superimposed over all his imaginings the uncomprehending blankness of Francie's face. Sometimes during that night he hated and blamed her. The house was empty and he really wanted her there to tell her so. Any final understanding of Mr Tibbet must include this night and his perception of it, the sound of a yellow sports car disappear-

ing into the distance, a message not quite his own that for a moment he had had the courage to send. If he could write his own incoming mail what would he write? Because he didn't know, the fiction wouldn't be entirely hollow: he would need to write it to find out.

In the night he stumbled downstairs through the empty house and sat with the gaze of someone unused to insomnia, staring at the shelf of books Bess had so much enjoyed. Books are incoming messages even if they don't arrive through the post. We know enough of him to know that he knew that. Even without opening them they spoke to him of Bess and Francie, making him recognise a need for both women. He would send a message; and of course receive the message he sent, or aspects of it. Why else? The outward lines are open. For once Francie is easier to talk to than Anna. The noble dead would help him speak just as they had often helped him keep silent.

PAGE TWENTY FOUR

All the signs as she approached Junction 20 told Anna of a decision to be made: these were the divided ways. Northwards suddenly became specific with the suggestion of proper names that meant little to Anna, but with that kind of littleness that meant much: Worcester (she didn't know Worcester but she felt quite warm about it, she didn't fear it the way she found herself now fearing..) Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool. Where was Coventry or was it Daventry? Place names from overheard TV news broadcasts. You need to understand that West, for Anna, was quite out of the question at this point.

There is a way of seizing a decision, in which the body tempo quickens in foresense of the rightness of what will come next: I could here be discussing the success Mr Tibbet has always had in his jobs. But as for Anna, without her knowing it, her right foot began to ease off the accelerator and she slumped a little into the seat, as though slowness and hesitation could take her out of the need to decide. The sounds changed as more cars moved out into the third lane, angrily past her. She resisted them as though moving into the slow lane would itself be the decision she wished to avoid. The resistance was stubborn and desperate since she wanted to be liked even by unknown motorway drivers. Buenos Aires was somehow postponed.

In the event I think the car made the decision, though perhaps it was the Home in Home Counties that did it. At the last moment where compromise was no longer possible the car made a slide by default leftwards, almost sliced in two by the heavy road markings where the divide occurred and almost sliced in two from behind since she was now in the fast lane and travelling at the speed of decision by surrender.

There was a wave of relief and suddenly it was she who was driving again, checking mirrors and moving purposefully eastwards.

A car can massage organs which no masseur can reach: it is possible to be more and less aware of this. Absolute awareness of it is stillness. The massaging effect is vibratory. Little is contributed by the backward displacement of all the organs in the body cage pulled elastically towards the spine, just as the spine itself is thrust into the car seat and the seat pulls against the floor boards, all in an attempt to cancel out the forward motion of a projectile through space. Friction or pure space glide? I am suggesting that at this point Anna's became friction-consciousness and that in her sense of it the car wasn't going anywhere a specially designed vibrating platform wouldn't also be going, given the difference of inertia in speed.

Another way of saying this is that, the major decision made, she was lulled: there was no Buenos Aires in the sky, there was no Heathrow, there was just three-dimensional Anna holding as steady as she could as the road or the world spun beneath her. It was a condition without foreseeable end, without any need for end, though at the very moment of forming that perception two contingencies, one mechanical the other physiological, by offering themselves to her mind, signalled the end of the perception. Mark this as the moment when you are about to go to sleep and the question forms itself: is this what it feels like to be about to go to sleep? Every insomniac knows that question and the fear that follows it.

Is this the order and can we have two perceptions simultaneously? (1) The Fuel Gauge: Even little yellow dream cars need petrol. (2) Her bladder. The sensation of massage there changing hardly perceptibly from one of localised well-being into the nascent discomfort of the need to pee. Both those needs are planned for along the motor-way, being part of

what is known as SERVICES. Anna had as yet no wish to eat or drink and it had not yet occurred to her to buy anything. The word SERVICES on its blue background did make her test out her hunger and thirst and to feel unsure. Was it laziness that made her not want to be hungry? As for buying anything well-wrapped in the shop or playing with the machines, she didn't even think about it. Nor did she think about the sign saying TELEPHONES. She didn't think about it but it was there all the same in the model of the MOTORWAY SERVICE STATION that she was using.

She began to measure distance to this now provisional destination. Milometer: 23827/2. Services 14. Milometer reading will be 23841. She had never measured the distance to Buenos Aires. Services Area Leigh Delamere was not even named yet in her consciousness and might never be and there she was counting off the miles to it and posing already the problem of the next destination since a service 'area' can only be provisional. Such is the notion of service.

PAGE TWENTY FIVE

Bess, Francie and Arnold were many miles from Mr Tibbet's home with no clues where Anna might have got to except the now diminished suggestiveness of the diminishing purr of her engine and an idea, purely imagined, of the way the gravel fell back in twin wake patterns on the driveway. Arnold waited for more clues than those since they weren't his and he didn't know what was meant by the Apricot Girl unless she be a stolen painting by Thomas Gainsborough. He did know that she was somewhere else and that Francie probably would be too. Either everything would seem to move beyond him or he would have to make himself useful. When he asked Bess where she was Bess just answered, Well probably not in Buenos Aires but who can say? Poor Arnold. There was intensity then in the silence he expressed but none in the way Francie said, There's no chance, Anna's free. I admire her. Why bother?

They were all then silent. Francie's eyes gazed with tranquil, eternal clearness. For a second or two she was blissful with what she wished to believe, that a girl she didn't know was blessed in leaving one home, a home she did know. Francie hadn't thought of the night, only that Anna had won an absolute freedom and that she herself was absolutely constrained and that there was thus a polarity in their conditions that put them beyond envy. This makes it clearer than it was. Francie had never seen Anna's car and yet she knew it was a sports car and she knew that its paintwork shone. The Herald was a worry and an expense and its MOT was due. Anthony used to help her with that and where was he now?

Just then the phone rang. Bess looked at Francie and so did Arnold but her time-scale was still eternal and so they looked at each other and Bess saw from Arnold's eyes that she

should answer. This is what Arnold heard and what Francie would have done had she been listening:

Hello.

Yes.

No it isn't.

Well... yes, in a way she is, but then again (as Bess looked across at Francie), she isn't.

I could explain but I won't. (Arnold to himself: how can that be said without giving offence? This is how.) I can take a message if you like.

A poem? A sonnet? OK, hang on while I get some paper and something to write with. (A glance at Arnold who was, of course, already getting these.)

Right. I'm ready. Take it slowly.

And Bess began writing, smiling to herself, and Francie looked up at the silence this end and noticed the shape the writing was taking and stiffened, her eyes becoming glazed instead – from one sense of eternal to another: against time now. Bess was all calmness, the ecstatic efficiency of the divine secretary.

Yes I'll tell her. Good-bye.

She turned to Francie. That's from Edwin. You'll get a proper copy later, he said, but he wanted you to see it now. He sounded excited.

The calmness of Bess made it so much easier. Francie shook herself and then read:

I laid out our love on the patterned tiles
As one dead of the cold and placed a feather
To her mouth in sudden doubt. Such sweet smiles
Formed there in her breathless lips: did ever
Death stir this way? Motes in the bright dust-beams
Didn't move but the feather did, in time
With love's breath kindling my belief. It seems
Ridiculous but this isn't a mime

Of emotions: it was real hate blurring
Our first feelings. We don't know how to fake
These things; of course problems keep occurring
Which test us sorely – no reason to break

Apart, though; it'll all work out one day.
My heart says loudly: trust her and stay.

I don't believe it, she said, though she continued to hold the piece of paper in her hand. I don't believe him and I don't believe it. I don't believe 'our love'. I don't believe in it. Why should 'our love' be the body of a woman? He's making me up. He keeps making up feelings. He makes up hate and love. I don't believe him. It is a mime. He hasn't seen me since the last one.

The last one? asked Bess. Arnold, receiving the signal, went to fetch it and came back with both. The first one made her smile again but the second made her whistle. Oh cruell time, she said, where did he find those rhymes? You can believe those if nothing else.

For a second or two Francie almost responded to the chance her sister offered her not to be the her or the you, not to be so personally implicated, but instead to take I and love or even lust as equal figures in a garden of artifice. She imagined them as seeds that could be ordered from Thompson and Morgan. You could buy whatever mixed packet you liked. You could say that Francie's failure to respond was the necessary condition for Edwin's persistent form of lying.

Come on, what about the Apricot Girl, said Bess.

PAGE TWENTY SIX

The day was only the first of many similar ones. Mark Tibbet, essaying a pose of voluptuous indolence, stopped at home to be near the one telephone that might be used by the three people whose voices he wanted to hear. Only Bess might find out where he worked and contact him there – she was a lady of some initiative and had outstripped all the others in his imagination. Anna had never known where he spent his days when away from home. He had so cultivated the gesture of the mysteriously enriched return, the unpredictable but luminous arrival in the large car that only the squeezing of the grains of gravel announced. It was (I think) a Mercedes-Benz and the windows were darkened against the incursion of glare or any other troublesome feature of the exterior world. Like himself it was all interiority, to be guessed at. This was not the car the family went picnicking in. On a warm Sunday anyone could see the genial family man on his way to a part of the moor they wouldn't know how to get to. Recently he had made the journey much less often but had concentrated instead on approximating as nearly as he could in a part of his own garden to the moorland qualities he previously transported his family to experience.

Above the beech tree all was domestic. Your attention, as you looked across, stopped at the tree in order to take in its form, filled out to become green, quiet and steady; in the summer the spread of leaves, and the massive and more local movements of parts in the wind, offered an endless but enclosed narrative in which your eye could not return to where it had started because it had started in an idea of greenness and fullness and had thereafter moved on to the surface of particulars.

In the winter there was light through the boughs giving you a consciousness of hard edges. But below all that was where

he had had the work done, ensuring that the foreground was continuous with a distance that went off into diffuse light, offering possibilities of radiant spiritual journeys whose destinations were all in the poignancy of perceptual self-disappearance, the way sunsets can fill us with a consoling melancholy: a consolation that seems necessary in the directed linearity of our otherwise time-sense. Mr Tibbet had not yet imported the acid soil he needed for the underfoot springiness of the moors, that cushioned separation between a person and perceived Nature. He would do so, though, for he loved tormentils.

He had in his hand a small heavy tumbler half full with a clear liquid of about the colour and viscosity of gin with a small measure of dry vermouth. In it floated the thinnest sliver of lemon peel: even alone and at home Mr Tibbet is a stylist. Who knows who might enter? But of course that isn't the point: voluptuous indolence may not be natural to him but consistency of style is and doesn't need an audience to sustain it. Think of his book-shelves. The wonderful thing is that there was a lemon in the house. A stylist attends closely to his materials. My belief is that a secretary at 'work' saw to practical details like this by ordering them over the phone. It is certain that Mrs Tibbet didn't and Mr Tibbet's assurance is by now momentous, that is habitual. Put out your hand and there's a lemon. Never run out of vermouth, for that faintest suggestion of colour in the glass. Make a contrast by thinking again of Francie. Do you think she would ever have a lemon in the home unless Arnold knew she wanted one?

There is a bottle of dry vermouth. One of them – Clifford probably – brought it round one night.

Compare the two now when deeply troubled, for Mark Tibbet is deeply troubled, but the cool glass in his hand, the rightness of it there and the rightness of the mixture in it,

that offers (or is symptomatic of) a certain poise. Deep trouble is a ruffled brow; you may remember Jack Hawkins: the solidity is so manifest the furrows are actually endearing and increase the aggregate of ambient love and admiration.

Just sip that drink – the alcohol tasted not gulped straight to the heart of a desperation that vulgarly needs it. Where did ‘voluptuous indolence’ come from? A hint, just a hint, I would guess, to the secretary who orders the lemons. It is a sophisticated joke because she doesn’t believe it either. Someone attends who is deceived. This is a possible sense of the divine, a placation of the attendant spirits, sprites of the darkened glass attracted there by the wealthy allure of secrecy. Beat them back.

In his hand he had a tumbler and he stood – for he had been walking about the house at first from window to window – in front of his book-shelves, looking as though he was looking at them. But in his other hand he held a document which distracted him. It was an Insurance Policy (underwritten by the Guardian Assurance Company) and that hand represented the part of his mind that was with Anna in the state of pragmatic foresight that had won Mr Tibbet his reputation. Because with the passing of night Anna had passed out of any projected narratives he could calmly consider. He had to assume more and more an accident, physical, moral or spiritual – a disaster now generalised beyond any exact imagining since the earlier strands were lost. How could Anna have slept, risen and moved on, neatly dressed and breakfasted? He knew where the lemons were but he couldn’t allow even this straightforward orderliness to his daughter.

When the phone rang he picked it up too hurriedly, began speaking too urgently. Usually the way he said his name suggested a calmness like Jack Hawkins, suggested a talismanic calming power in the name itself.

This was Bess. He showed no calmness and swallowed a large mouthful of his drink. Has Anna returned? Why should he feel pain at her concern. The initiative had passed to Bess. We're all coming to see you then. There was no room for qualification and in not qualifying Mr Tibbet knew that he was accepting help. He felt very weak and uncertain and found that he wanted Bess to hurry, that she'd taken from him all the time between then and their arrival.

PAGE TWENTY SEVEN

Ferme les yeux visage noir: All liquid cools us and is desirable. The scented tang of herbs, the hint of ascorbic poignancy in the twist of lemon: ah we know what we like; the ice floats, doesn't it, tinkling out the accompaniment to a control that is that delicate and tasteful. Shut your eyes, your face is black within. Eyes closed, Mr Tibbet says no with his head.

No, no, no, no. It is the pain of expectation he says no to. Someone he loves is missing, necessarily so. If she were to return, everything would or would not be the same. Someone is coming who will change things. Taste that drink: the act of taste is exactly the act of control. Perhaps the heroism is muted but it is there none-the-less, given the usual web of relativity. For example how would things change if the drink was Pernod? Would Arnold, coming in, know what was happening? Noticing the drink in Mr Tibbet's hand, what would he think? There is a grossness in alcohol which Francie would fix on, knowing another need, Arnold knowing her need.

And now it is the lightest of visual touches Bess gives, as she enters, a tenderness of optical caress the glass receives, the glass in its precise postural relationship to Mr Tibbet's lips, his throat; Bess in Mr Tibbet's imagination arriving unannounced and singular, there before him at the phone. Yes, yes, yes.

PAGE TWENTY EIGHT

Edwin's mind approached the blankness he willed on many occasions. The vacancy was necessary, for without the special act of voidance it swam with the compelling trivia of his days, a lazy multi-directional swarm of more-or-less idle thought he could do little with. He had wondered once if he couldn't find a form that could carry the illusion of multiple, kinetic superimpositions like the linear effects achieved in computer graphics. On paper he had managed only a sequence or cluster of quite separate banalities which missed the air of assembled significance that he felt would have rescued the exercises. His friends in the computer industry just laughed at him when he questioned them on the technical possibilities.

So now he went blank instead, to allow a state in which fictions might form. He put to sleep all the sportsmen of his brain. Even if there existed specific stimuli, receptors and nerve-pathways in continued operation he did his best to ignore them or block them off. For example reflexively lifting his right hand to his face he began gently scratching his cheek. He found himself doing it and wrote: face caress. A meditation aid? Where could he find out? Who could tell him? The reflex-response transferred itself to the page and instead of scratching skin he scratched paper, leaving marks like this: *Itch. Change that soap now.*

He had a mental list of soaps, many on it already eliminated from use.

Lift the scales from my eyes.

That started as 'lift the scales'. He admitted that to himself, 'From my eyes' was an ennobling suffix or an unpremeditated and spurious plea for spiritual insight.

I simply cannot follow your drift.

He went for what he now had for rescue. Scales as in music. A musician – a saxophonist – practises scales up and down monotonously. Next door his neighbours look at each other and turn up the sound on the television set. Gradually he drifts into the hints of melody, though the scales underpin it. I can't follow your drift.

Edwin looked up from his desk, his mind not at all blank. He spanned his forehead with his left hand, cradling his temples with his thumb and second finger. There was a pulse under each which seemed to quiet. He closed his eyes and sat there. After a minute or two he sat forthrightly. He scrawled through the lines he had written and wrote firmly and deliberately:

I am talking to you, Francie; the tiles

That was better. He should have remembered Francie. Sleep and poetry. To sleep – to drift away into the numbness of associations, and then to come back sharply with your mind as crisp as the herbs in dry vermouth, and to find there Francie, a lucid figure in his unsolicited imaginings, and to find about her a patterning of words that pleased him even in anticipation:

I am talking to you, Francie; the tiles
I start each poem with are yours; feathers
Float in the imaginary air your smiles
Place within me. It is my wish never

Stop Edwin in his tracks and at this point he has no idea at all what it is he claims to wish never to do and yet a sense of rhythmic momentum assures him that he will know if he just listens to himself. He does not consider himself a liar and he is deeply grateful to Francie as the aesthetic occasion for his own continuities. But his mind is no more on this (or her) than on the rhyme he approaches now familiarly:

To lose you: I fix words in space like beams
To hold the roof-weight of feeling each time
There is stress there

These beams were solid, seasoned and old-fashioned – probably oak though Edwin wouldn't be able to name it – fulfilling a mild craft sense that had drifted in with the metaphor. Even so he could not keep out of his eye a lorry-load of triangular roof-trusses in bright soft wood, just then being off-loaded in the new estate opposite.

or all we had said seems
Somehow wasted.

Ah the delicious impertinence of that we. We could say all this is a power game, swollen and reduced. We could say poor Francie. Francie is his lady, madonna without child, whose lips and eyes change, whose lips and eyes he changes, but the we slips in past that he and he doesn't know it. Bess would.

That's why I needed 'mime'
As an idea too: compare the blurring
Our words cause with the truth of that no-fake
Medium. The rhymes are my truth occurring
In each poem whatever else may break
The pattern. They stay the same as the days
Pass and since they are you I need them as stays.

Edwin reached for his card.

PAGE TWENTY NINE

Not the Herald now but Bess's Imp, busier and more insistent, if a purr a kind of kittenish purr. And Arnold cramped in the back, excluded by his notion of sisterliness from even the simplest questions to his driver and her inert co-pilot. Tears rose into the eyes of the boy who had for a moment one of those most transitory of unsolicited perceptions in which he saw himself later in life, still boyish but aged, remembering forgotten beauty.

Two heads of hair, two necks, the hair moving about in the impish summery air, held momentarily in airborne forms vital with his own desire, expressed as a rich perfume he couldn't name. And when momentarily Bess's hair – for he sat behind the driver with his feet across and behind Francie – blew up and across, improvising a jagged parting up the back of her neck and into the heavy criss-crossways of her crown, the tender skin of her neck was naked and the ache then in him to kiss just where the first downy hair ciliated silkenly, oh he had to turn away from it and not look, and his desire was like a mistake eating his heart and, he couldn't help imagining, theirs too. But in turning he saw Francie's ear revealed, the ear which in her sleep he had never dared kiss for fear the kiss would wake her, though he had always wanted to.

The lifting rear window of the car was a screen of utter transparency on to his uncontrollable wishes and the vibration of the rear engine made manifest to him intentions he wishes strangely to deny. He shifted his sitting position uncomfortably. If only the silent voices weren't so persistent. If only the sisterly silent talk were not an opaque screen across the front seats leaving him naked to himself.

Oooh, scratch my neck, Arnold, said Bess, giving her voice rotary twist speed to indicate its passage right through the screen, its twist tone indicating: that was my sister, this is for you. Ooh yes, just there. The scratching was the trembling of his hand to be in there, with caressive purpose, in the softest places known to him. Ah that's better, thanks. The gesture was so matter-of-factly dismissed and Arnold had still not spoken though by fortune his fingers had been allowed not to lie. He felt a wish of resentment against all of Bess except the back of her neck. And now, for a flash, he resented not resenting even that.

Where are we going, he asked, on the courage left over by that resentment, as a kind of backwash, and the pulse in his eardrums almost drummed out any reply.

The answer was of course Bess's, since Francie has surrendered to transport like a patient in a dentist's chair, assuming the oncome of pain and simply wishing to reduce the volume of felt self that might experience the pain: to give and in giving to give as little as possible and yet for that little to be everything. How massy and rounded the wish for diminution made her feel.

But the answer was Bess's and she seemed to know what she was about for she said, Sir, to a wise man, all the world's his soil. And Arnold was excluded by a reply that referred to much more than it answered. But then she added, with a minimal deflection of her head, as though to include Francie if she cared to be included, but otherwise in a self-address that Arnold's question had permitted, I'm not sure Mr Tibbet is a wise man. And by the way, Francie, – the deflection openly inclusive this time – whatever happened to that soil-seller friend of yours? Now he was not wise. Or at best a shop-soiled wisdom, I'd say. Clifford, wasn't it?

If I were to exaggerate Francie's response I'd call it a sob. Rheostat, she said, and the tone, if there was a tone, was dismissive in the manner of dismissing a presence whose dismissal is known not to work.

Arnold looked anywhere now but in the car. He looked out to where the details of a world could just be held to attention, just beyond the skimmed band of too much speed, beyond a texture generalised by passage, towards particulars that almost at once were submersed into an emblematic significance, from which too he had to turn away: stones, leaves, broken blossoms. Even looking away, they gained power in word-wake. Oh what's like what?

From nowhere came the need for a refreshing ice-cream.

PAGE THIRTY

He had no ambition now to arrive anywhere, except perhaps at one of those arbitrary points of arrest where ice-cream vans are: a scenic car-park, a beach. Mostly the vans themselves wandered, assuming a sedentary population of young children they could allure with tunes. He knew they were headed for the source of Francie's messages – or rather for one of the sources – and though he could help her receive them he needed for that courage a sense that their origin would always be obscure to him, that their power would be that displaced one, as of a dream just woken from, and not the power that might emanate from the fleshly presence of an older male, enigmatic yet totally competent.

He wished now to travel always towards the backs of two desired heads, never closing in, though perhaps momentarily overwhelmed by an emotional wave more projective than the constant momentum of the car, a wave that could carry him in and back. How precise was the design of the car seats: how they all aimed themselves precisely at the back of something else, Bess quite consciously parting the neck-hair of space-ahead as the car carried her towards the hoped for solution to entertaining mysteries.

The weather was splendid and the road as smooth as a ball-room floor, tiny clouds of French chalk lifted by the dancing feet of crows, milky wake-lines behind the car held in the mirror-air and then dropped as part of the increasing clarity of the distance constant motion posited behind as a fixed premise. Bess, all mirror and screen attention, had clarity both ways and in any case these hazes should not be confused with the thick cloudiness of Francie's set of ever ready associations. Bess, image of all felinities, faced the way the car faced, faced the way the mirror faced, glancing off the milky

adolescent anxieties of the loving lover's brother into the milky way of neglected space and back forward again, the boy's desire behind her like a joke that began to excite her, into a space sliced with linearity, sucked into the line of its own imminent neglect.

Francie turned her head away and drummed irritably. She would be in torment the whole outing.

PAGE THIRTY ONE

The telephone was significant and pregnant with further significance. It grew, and Mark Tibbet wasn't used to that: the artefacts of technology were the products of concepts and processes he understood. He was a member of a developed nation and an especially educated member at that. He quite nonchalantly shared credit for such achievements. The term 'man-made' included him. He had made it and had made it to use when he needed it. He pressed the little buttons with the kind of absent-minded power of one thoroughly used to the consequences and he never allowed the little machine's capacity for unexpected sound to alter in any way his sense of the ordered spatial proportions of his surroundings. Think of the way he peremptorily, though with a brisk studied thoughtfulness, pushed the phone a few inches away from him on the desk after a call, the way he carefully brought it closer those same few inches when about to make his numerological and electronic summons.

Always when Mark Tibbet sipped his drink was the barely formed thought that he could have made what he was drinking; in one sense, I suppose, could have made it with his own hands, but more likely that he could have supervised the entire operation, giving technical advice always in relation to sensory or aesthetic standards. The old pun about "spirits" gave him no feeling of a mysterious potency in alcohol.

But here now the cool drink heated him, brought with it a world of altered spatial proportions. All the morning he had kept his eye from afar on the gate that broke the road hedge and he had held on to that distance as on to a coolness, while an ever-warming telephone grew beside him. But now waiting became too much for an instigator and he himself began to make some calls, even though he knew that these might

prevent the unsettling speech he awaited. He called the office because he needed to keep in touch. He did this not only from expediency but because he was home-sick, though that word is only accurate if you take into account that work was part of the larger matrix of home: Mark Tibbet always needed the absent presence of his other life. Images of paternity and daughterly love sustained his feeling at work that in any activity he was more than he was. Driving a hard bargain was the complete family man. Similarly, of course, he imported into his 'home' a worldly authority that seemed to orchestrate a happy family with a largely absent wife. Who knows where Mrs Tibbet (Alice, I believe) was or what she made of all this?

There are distinctions to be made about absence. In his case absence flows in an alternating current with personal authority as a measurement in volts through work/home and each absence is a kind of suspension of life and power, so that Mr Tibbet could constantly enact heroic arrivals and returns, setting offices and homes in true motion, out of their suspended life. The telephone could be like the indicator light on a tuning screen. Switch on. Switch off. I won't be long. But now there are uncontrollable absences and failures to arrive. Despite international dialling arrangements he felt that Anna had drifted somewhere into the lacunae of the system and that Bess's and Francie's failure to arrive was a crueller absence over which he had just as little control.

Recalling earlier times he did three things that had the nature of a personal ritual. He went upstairs and changed his light grey worsted suit for jeans and a red jumper and he went in to one of the spare rooms and fetched an alto saxophone. In the drawing room he sat facing the book-shelves, wetting the reed and then he played. His manner of playing was rather startling, even at first to himself: a series of blasts and contemplative silences, interspersed with reedy and mellifluous

snatches of popular melody which disappeared again into forgetfulness or resentment. The silences were heaviest.

And then the phone rang and I knew it would, Mark Tibbet said to himself, though shocked all the same.

Hello, he said, with his voice almost calm, but it was somebody for his wife and there he was saying the usual, I'll get her to call you when she gets back.

PAGE THIRTY TWO

Anna was lost. She passed road names like Lordship Lane but these could be a clue to nothing, were ways of dealing with detail within some larger significant meaning and this is what she no longer had. The motorways had encouraged her in her simplified map of luminous centres, according to which London was a quite definite entity that you could, as it were, greet as you entered.

Heathrow was its airport.

And the word 'soul' kept confusing her. It was somehow connected with 'lost' and her sense of the motor-drive as pure flight. When the motorway gave out on her she just found her stomach sick and tense with the fear that with arrival she had to do something. What she wanted to do was wash, brush her hair (that especially), and then in some free association with her car like that enjoyed by the blessed sprites of television advertisements – either leaning out of it, or leaving it, or approaching it – to greet the favoured partner, the handsome laral projection of the city's single homes, who stepped out of the city, out of scale with his backcloth, to smile on her in recognition of her fully individuated personality.

But this car was smaller and tenser and stealable and she didn't know what she was looking for. Nothing existed that didn't empty her of her earlier hopes. She wondered where were the avenues of the respectable folk, where cars like hers could park, green and a footpath away from the houses, and she could hide out because no element of her personal style would disclose an incongruity. She thought of night and of her very own pink puffy duvet left miles to the west of her. She scared herself, waiting to duplicate the ensconcing soporific calm of that own room of hers, to sleep there tonight

and yet away from it and then to wake to an early morning foray into... People have for so long been telling exciting stories about such adventures but she allowed them and then shrank from them. Her clutch of O levels and half-finished short-hand course badly needed the kind of allure her daddy alone was able to give them.

Oh God who was the you she found herself addressing: *Then I found you it was like ...* There was some complementary soul she aimed at but she knew no one, she had no friends in London, well at least not of her own, they were all daddy's.

Then she remembered Henry Walters and all that he had been to her and everything he had said and an altered map began to constellate itself around a new emotional centre. She didn't know where in London he lived and so his remembered name didn't give her somewhere to aim her car at yet. But she did have his phone number: a series of dialled digits, rotary finger-frictions, could pluck an individual soul out of the megalopolis and seize its attention. She felt warmer and thrilled with the sense that after all she had come to do something, not quite defined, and that this was therefore an adventure. And when she found an empty phone booth and could park by it, it beamed stolidly for her, the future-box of everywhere and nowhere.

She opened the door on to the puff of other lives, stepped in to a space of cultural and physiological gender smells which compressed around her as the door closed in on her. The mouthpiece was especially thick with tobacco memory, scent, talcum powder and sweat, message prints of former air-wave adventurers. She pushed the door back open a few inches, holding it there with her foot and trying heavily to breathe. Somehow there was a like-thatness about this squeezed nowhere environment: as a would-be communicant she had to take her share in the scent, sweat and tobacco.

And of course she wasn't like that. Somebody else's breath was left trapped in the mouthpiece, thick, warm, subtly nauseating.

No she wasn't like that. Why was she ringing Henry Walters? And yet she was and there was the ringing tone now.

PAGE THIRTY THREE

Edwin put the phone down in frustration. He had let it go on ringing: eight more brrr sounds and then another eight, using this extra device of number superstition to will an answer. His last sonnet had so manufactured in him an affection for Francie that he wanted for once to address her directly. He would insist this time on talking to her. Francie: he would say with a measured urgency, I want to tell you something. And then he would pause: telephone silence is enigmatic and forceful in that the medium that holds the silence tends to breathe through it, audibly upholding it. I really want to tell you something. The repetition with the additional word signifying sincerity and urgency would be modulated with extreme attention to pitch tone and duration. Then he would pick up the *really* again, in a final assertion of the prime reality of the fictive affective life, and dwell there lovingly in the real. Here it would be, I really love you, Francie. A gasp, an intake of recovery – brief, further sign of authenticity – would close his last prepared statement, and open the way for unprepared improvisations of affectionate dialogue. She would melt into her own name and even if the conversation became an ur-speech of baby murmurs, that would be wonderful: the truthfulness of two hearts released by syllabic artifice.

Shit said Edwin as he put the phone down. There is only one prepared moment for such an act of self-surrender directed at another, for the telephonic meta-sonnet. Shit, he said again. He took a loose piece of A4 paper. He sharpened his already sharp HB pencil. He cleaned off the eraser at the mouth-end of the pencil by rubbing it carefully on the table top. Down the right hand edge of the paper he dropped his fourteen rhyme words. Tiles. Feathers. He tapped the phone with his index finger, growing afraid of the syllabic vacancy that might rub out all his new sincerity, all this new found coincidence of word and meaning.

never rile me with feather-tile(d)
motions or coarse metrical smiles: the truth
beamed down time is mine; it's a
natural occurrence: you can't
blur it break it or fake it. daylight
honesty stay with me.

Aw shit, Edwin murmured to himself, though not without some pleasure. He scrawled it out with his pencil in a gesture of apparently disdainful carelessness though, as with all Edwin's erasures, it remained legible in case at some later date he might wish to reclaim it as a casual not-quiteness of his genius at its most nonchalant.

He leant down putting his forehead against the coolness of the table top. A cool soothing ache dropped to the surface. He stayed there but opened his eyes on to a blurred sensation of wood. He raised himself so he could see it more clearly. He felt the grain with his finger tips and was reminded to look over to his mantelpiece. Suspended in two acts of attention he looked and stroked, looked back and imagined a stroking. He sat back musing. Then he took his pencil again and wrote:

To erase Francie from a poem

Some of his carvings wowed me. The cat,
The one in the polished hard wood
He did late in life when he was blind, that
Really did what wood should.

Of course you could tell from that he was gay:
I think in his choice of yellow
For the grain that curved in the way
Hard wood can when allowed to mellow.

That's rubbish too, said Edwin, though this time he crossed nothing out but smiled as he mused on the new rules.

Oh yes you scare me: You're the cat
That caught the canary. Would
N't you like to try: then the fat
Would really be in the wood

Fire, the flames cackling gay
ly in their yellow
& totally absorbing way
To burn you while you bellow.

He found that he had not removed the fear but that this new
you hollowed out a space for a new personal distaste. If
Francie had not answered the phone where was she?

Sometimes I think that cat
's got the answer. He's wood
-en. You try to flat
-ten him with a mean mood

& he sits there as gay
as you please. Hello,
he'll invariably say,
his calm making you yellow.

You and he have equal right to the proper noun.

that cat
ate the pud
then shat
as he would
on my Gay
News. a yellow
heap. You'll pay
I bellow.

As Edwin reached out for the card that would carry the mes-
sages beyond his home, he hesitated. Only if he sent them to
the *you*, to the *he*, would the hand tremble that read them.
And he didn't yet know who you were. For the first time he

was falling through the hole in his own method.

the cat
shoed
shat
wood

o gay
fellow
it was my grey
cello

Yes that could go next to the cat on the mantelpiece, a pun
among ornaments.

He wondered whether or not to try the phone again.

PAGE THIRTY FOUR

Francie no longer wanted to arrive. Being driven by another, although it might just as well have been herself, was the mechanised symbol of a sullen destiny, the continuo drone behind a desultory sequence of improvised melodies. Bess and the car were one. She was with them and Arnold too, in the back. It was a tableau frozen and moving, desperately unmindful of a destination. Bess psychopompos. Like at home when as an adolescent she used to read those letters and brood over them at night. They were letters full of airiness and affection and were addressed to Bess, who read them airily and cast them aside, smilingly awaiting the next whatever-it-was that invariably did come for her. And yet if Bess was crossed there was hell and holy bedlam. They all knew that and yet Bess never was crossed.

For Arnold one neck very stiff now, the other tender with misty anticipation. He never wanted to arrive anywhere, to break the silken meditation. Thoughts of arrival interrupted his caressive imaginings leaving him with a sickened stomach. No enigmatic Apricot girl could give him what he now had if he had no fear. But he had fear and wanted only to arrive at fearlessness: not courage, he didn't want courage – least of all a courage impatient for consecutive act and destination – but a specific absence of fear in which a possible warmth was contained in an aura of perpetual possibility. If the car should stop I'd be afraid, he thought.

Bess I don't want to go, Francie said, looking at her sister's profile and feeling a fear in her chest at its energetic silence, as Bess drove. Bess, Francie said, I don't want to go. This time Bess smiled and her smile failed to transcribe itself into foot and pedal movement. There was not the faintest change in engine sound. Bess, why are we going? Bess did turn

briefly now to gauge her sister's pain of indecision: the one face black within, the other bearing trace of the polluting woe. But we must, she said breezily, he's expecting us and besides I want to read his books.

Oh God, said Francie helplessly, but of course her not wanting to go lacked any luminosity of courage. It was a darkness she allowed herself to subside into again, for she certainly lacked the courage to return with anything but a limp sense of failure.

Couldn't we phone? she asked despairingly as they passed busily a bright red call-box.

Oh no, Bess said, we're nearly there. Besides, the telephone is Mr Tibbet's special medium. I'll bet he sleeps next to one. It wouldn't do to signal through it a mere failure to arrive. If I spoke he'd hear my enthusiasm to come. If you spoke he'd hear you sigh and it would be like perfume all the way down the line. He'd need you desperately for your intangibility and helplessness. You see, he likes distance. Look at his marriage. Think of his view. That is why there are three of us and we are going to get very close to him.

Francie envied Bess her clarity, envied Mark so precise a thing as distance to like, if indeed he did. She became aware of near other, with an uneasy stirring of Arnold in the back. She herself suffered a kind of gloomy impressionism, all middle distance, or worse, an unfocussed introspection. Was she distance, or were the distances within her? Oh bugger it. She turned to the back and smiled at Arnold. Are you all right, Arnold, she asked, and the manner of her turning and her question restored Arnold's infatuation, transmuted his stomach fear into a new quiver of stomach fear. He recalled the morning's sleeping kiss, and wanted Francie asleep again, in her own bed, so that he could stand over her, with breakfast in the oven.

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Some years earlier or later

Old desire, old passion, she added irically. The lazy thorns in the thicket surrounded her passionate face with fierce though softly swaying threat. If I were to push you either way, he said, your face would tear.

Not backwards, old desire. The old irony in her reply, her green irises glinting, a luminosity absent in the leaves of the dog-rose. Though there was a wind, the leaves didn't move. She looked at him, her pupils moving from large to small, now hard and cold, like tiny bullets in the Tragedy of King Lear.

It is not a painting by Nicholas Hillyard and you are not a young man. It – that – is behind you. Love is where your eyes are, green crystalline tracks that lead, in your case, forwards.

Francie looked at him hard but said nothing. He began to feel a kind of fear he had never felt.

Three or four strokes of the gun should be given.

Gun! She exclaimed if so coolly you can exclaim anything. But then dropping her voice, hard and low like her pupils – thorny? bullet-like? –. What do you mean, strokes?

The gun, he stumbled in a fear much like love or a love much like fear – desperately sans lust – is a grease gun, to be applied to grease nipples every 3000 miles.

Francie sighed, ducking out from under the thicket, whose thorny passion had torn her blouse on the left incline. Some plants are hostile. Her remark replicated itself in infinite

recess towards the past and the rediscovery of Mendel's work. Perhaps it was more than *towards* the past – perhaps it went *through* it at just that point when even in imagination you could no longer read the re-doubling. Someone had planted rent-hire irises. Aural mutation disturbs the present.

By such a twist I become ant or eel. She passed him again and spat, By the same token, history can be mistaken for metaphor. Or is it the other way round?

Francie. Francie! It was her back torn by thorny passion that aroused a jealousy much like fear or anger or love, like the dog-rose in every particular. Carried on invisible tracks of self-fear disguised as red weals of pain. Metaphor churning where it hurt. He felt it across his heart. It was the kind of stricture her eyes directed but across his chest, in the sternal hollow beneath his nipples, gripping the wet spongy bags, his lungs.

Francine, the pain! he shouted. Her back moved away from him in blue disdain. Her torn white blouse stuck to the weals, the jagged downward scratches, showing through where the cloth had been pulled away. He felt it this time in his lower intestines. He felt sick. As for her, her back was a garden, luminous with dog-rose.

When she left he knew it wasn't a *gesture* of leaving. That's the kind of misery he felt. As for her, she was going somewhere, contempt her baton, along a concrete paveway of historical instance, scattering metaphor in twin wakes behind her.

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