

How long can we live in the shadow of our own sorrow, the lean grey wolves stalking its perimeter at the farthest extreme where issue and action meet, where intentions are ratified or rescinded? History throws itself across our path preventing the future and deforming the present, all the worlds torn by a panic they never previewed in fact or fiction, the very wolves themselves examined at close range dissolving in an obedient familiarity we learned to caress in the past. They become our well-beloved pets in time, these hungry shadows we feared, these chimeras grounded in the core of unthinking reason, they become the creatures of habit made into programs we play again and again, we let them form the matrix of successive generations until at last a thread of sorrow loops our perceptions, our assessments, distorting even the voice of understanding which proclaims who we are and what we mean to be. Then we wallow in that dichotomy like juveniles clinically diagnosed, untreatable, loving the deformity we take for a gratuitous treasure, unwilling to concede the before or the after, as though we woke up one morning with swelling bites and declared our instant allegiance to the creatures ransacking our body in the night, feeding their disgusting forms on our blood. No my dear and once gracious companion at whom I hurl these remarks, a javelin thrower in the final competition to set new records for injuries received and bestowed, you will not become that deadly loop circumscribing my wits like a serpent. You can be expunged even though your long shadow, more insidious than pain or the wildly uncontrollable grief which once was your substance, even though that long grey shadow has leaked into every dark corner, taking refuge in whatever nurture old wounds can offer, finding

sustenance in time's oldest trick, the merging of memories, the dissipation of specificity in favor of a gelatinous ooze, a fertile bed where new life is created from old, you can be expunged. Why should you be free of the torment bred in that mess, released to plot new schemes and dream without those haunting eruptions from the past that sometimes fill the night with tears? I have wept in my sleep, in my dreams, such terrible screaming my throat burned when I woke, and the tears dropped one by one down my face. How can you be so free to love or not to love? I asked you that once long ago, and I ask it again. Is there an answer? And if there were, would you give it to me truthfully now that I am the enemy, thrown by your disaffection across a no man's land of mere neutrality into your enemy enclave? Would Prince Hamlet have become a bitter old man in maturity? Hamlet again. Arthur did not condemn Guinevere; did she condemn him as you condemn me, the assassin vindicating himself because his victim died? O these are subtle times my once dear companion, my long grey wolf who comes deceptively as one thing when I alone know him to be another.

You wouldn't expect to fall in love with your own sorrow, the sadness, the quiet grief chewing comfortably at the roots of your life, but then who can ever predict where affection will be placed? Except for us. People were in the habit of saying we looked alike, and I suppose we did in some ways. Even Scott Gormley, the poet we used to call him, when he first saw us together, he said, 'The chemistry is so perfect I'm surprised no one thought of this sooner.' He startled me with the banality of his concept and embarrassed you, although I don't know why you were so ill-at-ease. Was it his unseemly laughter, or some secret you feared he might betray? It wouldn't have mattered though, you projected our life together when we met. 'We were destined to be together, I knew that from the start,' you said. How foolish of me not to perceive that destiny can change. We write, we erase, we choose, we change. And sorrow, when everything else deserts us, when even our suffering is so tired of us it goes away, we cling to remembrance, to that shadow which falls before and behind us by day then haunts the long grey nights. Sometimes I wonder if that's why Orpheus looked back, to catch another glimpse of the sorrow trailing behind him, to taste the sweetness of departing grief one more time before restoring it to hell. He might not have been entirely displeased to watch his beloved fade and disappear. After all, he was used to being alone by then, used to the devastating act his suffering entitled him to, although he ought to have known his most ardent admirers had long since tired of that pathetic hysteria, and yet he sang so beautifully the trees in the woods swayed with his song, as we translate the venerable Bede. Once upon a time there was a harper who came from Thrace.

His name was Orpheus. Now Orpheus had an extraordinary wife, a *swithe aenlice wif*, whose name was Euridice. You were the harper and I the *swithe aenlice wif*. We went down into hell together, you and I, where it pleased your great talent to leave me in the shadows that threatened to foreclose my life. You have never glanced back, not once to see how your *swithe aenlice wif* was consumed by the fires you lit, not once to look with curiosity or compassion, to examine the devastation you left on the path carved through hell.

Maddened by his inattention, his dedication to foreign mysteries, and the obsessive remembrance of this wife, the women of Thrace they say, destroyed Orpheus in the end by tearing him to bits. A violent story in the telling; perhaps it was more irritation than rage. God alone will tolerate the endless petulance of our grief, our exhausting sorrow. Suffer if you must, only make sure it does not show or that will destroy you faster than grief itself. Nothing is more chilling than the cool indifference of those we call friends, nothing is more numbing than the offhand dismissal with which they dispose of that long grey shadow, our life's companion. It is no romantic fantasy, people do die of grief. Orpheus was a special case though, and you were he, not I. When you finally did leave, even if I half expected you to change your mind, not just until the last moment but far beyond, I swore I would not suffer this defection as I had the others. One part of me was a blind man stepping into a black hole in the night, the other part said no, I will not do this, I will not do this. It was only that fervor, that determination and help from God Himself which glued the dismembered pieces together again. Nevertheless some two years or more afterwards I had a recurring thought projected on a dream, or possibly it was the other way around, a dream projected on a thought, like the distant longing for a cigarette years and years after you've quit smoking, it occurred to me to call you on the telephone, to dial our old number and say, 'Well now, isn't it time to come back, haven't you done this long enough?' For days the idea came so regularly I began to think it might be something. Eventually it struck me with such force it was a blow, you would have to leave someone else to come back to me, and after more than two years what suffering that would cause. The thought disappeared along with the legion of fantasies born and raised in sorrow. They have their moment, their day, their time, then we send them away. We must. But during the time we entertain them, play host to them, we are obliged to serve, to feed their requirements, and while we care for them we become their subjects, they rule us like a conquered land. The only escape is carefully planned subversion, tricks to outwit, outmaneuver a resourceful tyrant and his disciplined brigades. First remember these guests who invited themselves to the feast are not members of our household, they are

not who they say they are, not friend but enemy. It no longer matters if they have made themselves comfortable, so at home these usurping conquerors, they must be turned away or we will never have peace again, our life will be dedicated to looking after shadowy creatures who build a life of their own inside ours. We must, like a good general, infiltrate their ranks, starve them to submission, substitute our troops one by one for theirs until we reestablish ascendance, *maître chez nous*, master in our own house. Let them go, those lean and hungry shadows, let them go back to their own wilderness and leave us to ours.

II

Summer in Philadelphia, Jennie discovered, was a little unpredictable after all. Steaming seams of hot sun in May melting the roadway did not preclude cold days in August interleaved among the letters of the days. Even here she noticed, walking down Overbrook Avenue, the trees begin to change in August, even here a few trees start to change from green to yellow, the early flowering dogwood shows the first fringe of red at the edge of one or two branches. Owen Moore's wife Beth had surprised her once in mid-August on a hot and fragrant day, 'Summer's nearly over, the nights are getting colder.' 'And here too,' she thought, 'The nights are getting cooler. Is it always like this? You have to live in a place for twenty years to understand the weather, you have to see the earth and open sky to make any sense of it. Last night I heard the tac tac tac of the cicadas sounding almost electronic.' By day Jennie took short walks around the neighborhood. There was an elderly woman she met occasionally at midday who walked with a cane and great difficulty, a step or two at a time, one arm folded like a wing, useless against the side of her body. She'd had a stroke, could not speak any longer, emitting only clusters of sound which she hoped would pass for words. Jennie was moved by the persistence which impelled her a step at a time, and stopped once or twice to say a few words to her. The woman's face was soft, she had short, tightly curled white hair shining like a halo around her face which still bore the faint remembrance of freckles on delicate skin. She must have had red hair in her youth. One cool day when Jennie met her on the street, her stockings rolled down to the stiff inflexible ankles, tight blue slippers on her feet, she seemed to be walking more securely, with a more vigorous step. 'Hello there, how are you today, you're walking better I think.' While she was still speaking sounds began to cluster behind the woman's smile, and Jennie discerned

two recognizable words. ‘Tha’s right,’ came the response, ‘Tha’s right,’ she kept repeating as Jennie said, ‘Now your speech is coming back, I understood what you just said. You said that’s right, didn’t you?’ The woman smiled and smiled with pleasure, issuing her two words like a flock of birds above the confusion of sound that flowed from her lips, ‘Sad,’ thought Jennie, ‘No, not sad, hard, sad is for youth, hard is for age.’

She was thinking of her mother who had somehow managed to escape death, the wily adversary who had pushed her over the edge where she hung suspended week after week, not living and not yet dead either, thinking of the visit when she sat beside the bed for hours every day in a hospital more like a hotel, wondering if her mother had any awareness of her presence, wondering whether she could last out the week or even the night. Her sister had quietly begun to make arrangements for the end which seemed imminent, inevitable. Each day Jennie tried to decide whether to go back to Philadelphia or wait for what must surely come at any moment. There was no point waiting endlessly for her mother to die, unrecognized, unable to help or comfort her father whose grief seemed poised to kill him too, and no point leaving either. Finally she went home, waiting for the phone to ring summoning her back for the end. Weeks later she learned her mother had spoken the day after she left. ‘Where’s Jennie?’ she asked. So she had known after all. And then slowly, a miraculous recovery, the reengagement with life, the colossal agony of not dying. Later, the visit at the end of summer had been more difficult in some ways. Her mother was unable to eat, yet survival depended on the restoration of flesh to the hollow shell her body had become. It took some time for the miracle workers to discover their cure had made it impossible for her mother to swallow. Jennie’s father became a tyrant in his distracted efforts to pull his wife back from the grave, roaring, yelling, cursing now there was hope. From the bed where she lay not able to move or sit or stand without help, she was also obliged to interpose herself between him and those who looked after her. Jennie knew her mother well enough, this was more unbearable than any part of her wretched ordeal. Sometimes Jennie could make her father laugh, manage him with humor, although he was often in a rage so quickly there was no chance to divert the gusts of anger which rose from nothing except his life, destroying everything within range. In any case, his dissatisfaction with Jennie increased daily because, she discovered by accident, she refused to comply with his unspoken injunction insisting on her return. Why should she live in Philadelphia? What did she have there to compare with this city where she was born and raised, where her parents were in need of her? One late afternoon she sat on a small balcony off the living room in her parents’ apartment talking to him, trying to talk to him.

— Why are you going back to Philadelphia?

— Because I live there now, my life is there.

— But Jennie your roots are here, you were born here, your mother and I are here, your sisters are here.

— I'm sorry Daddy, I don't want to be separated from you, especially now, but I can't live in this place any longer. I'm afraid I don't feel my roots are here, as you put it. I've spent more than half my life trying to get out of this town, I stayed only for Bill's sake. Sorry, I realize you don't want to hear anything about him. That's the truth you know.

All this rolled in waves through Jennie's mind as she chatted with, or more accurately, directed a stream of cheerful comments at the frail woman with a cane and the tight, smiling face. She misrepresented herself a little in that conversation with her father when he said with anguish, 'But your roots are here,' misrepresented because she knew what he meant in spite of pretending the opposite. In fact, she loved that city which she knew block by block, pavement by pavement, that city where she could not go for a walk without meeting someone she had known for twenty years, or at least passing a stranger on the street who was no stranger, like the lunatics, the bag ladies, the street people, or the tall white haired man who looked like a film star and worked as a clerk in Eaton's, or the tiny hunch-backed man who always wore a pinstriped suit, or the pretty blonde woman with a collie and a young daughter who seemed so unchanged until the day Jennie noticed the daughter was a grown woman, the mother looked suddenly old, and the dog she walked was another dog. The city she had so arbitrarily disliked as a girl she started to care for during her street cruising nights with Bill, and then in the years with the band, surrounded by people who loved this city not just because it was their home, but because they liked it better than any place they visited across the country, then she capitulated to their enthusiasm, agreeing to a point, always holding in reserve, 'Well it's not New York and it's not London, but if you have to live in a city, muddy York has turned out well enough after all.' It was an affection based on familiarity, not a deep, irrevocable sense of belonging there, feeling at home there, she had never felt that, and in this sense there was no question of being rooted, as her father with characteristic drama had declared. If it was a question of roots she thought it preferable to dig in more comfortable soil, to plant herself in something other than the apparently fortuitous location picked by the accidents of birth, although she couldn't account for

Philadelphia, at least not to her parents. For reasons of her own this was the place she chose, even though that fragile lady who could not speak, who walked because she determined to walk, she was the only one she recognized on the street. As Jennie studied her face carefully, listening to the soft trickle of sounds which flowed past, hoping to make out another word or two, she thought with an acute reflex of regret, 'This woman was beautiful once.'

When she was younger Jennie could always imagine herself dead, but never old. At first she didn't believe it would be possible to live beyond the age of nineteen, that seemed time enough to finish everything, Bishop Berkeley did write his *New Theory of Vision* when he was nineteen, Thomas Chatterton was dead when he was seventeen, Rimbaud stopped writing at what, nineteen, a significant handful of poets and musicians died so young. When she sailed through nineteen years without any sign of decay she adjusted her perspective, allowing at most another ten years. Perhaps that gave her a competitive urgency, made her a little strident, given to extremes in pursuit of whatever bore the promise of something like love or wisdom or truth. By the time Jennie met Bill she had lost none of that conviction which bound her life to a tight frame, there was no inkling she would ever age, or Bill for that matter, die perhaps at any moment, but never live beneath skin that sagged, flesh that drooped, bones which shrank and broke, that would not happen. As the years accumulated behind and upon her there was never anything to divert the sense of impermanence which haunted her, never any reason to suppose she too would survive to be old. It is the way of the world that beauty perishes, mere sensory sweetness has limits imposed on it; that she had yet to learn. Meanwhile the pumping crescendos of sound which rose by day from the birds and their astonishingly prolific prey, insects sharing this world until the instant of their devouring, none of that or the unvarying drone from the grass and the trees by night with its rhythmic staccato interface, none of that brought Jennie to any regret for her abandoned life, only to a longing for a way which was not of the world.

III

History is an amusing pastime, a mirror through which we all step back and forth as often as the politicians, the bankers and the poets make imperative, but don't be deluded, this kind of study, this kind of story can never equip us to live through the crises, small and large, national or local, universal or merely personal, from which the ordinary fabric of everyday life is woven. If it happened once it

will happen again, nothing in our knowing the details of one disaster precludes another. Yet we can become wise, we can learn not to build our houses across an erupting geological fault or a flooding riverbed, we can learn to be safe, avoid the wrong place at the wrong time, seek the security of high ground protected from storm and wind and the unending night, but these are secrets no historian has access to, no book will ever convey, they must be sought elsewhere. So this history, this confession or satire or romance, a true story if you want to think of it that way, this is probably of no special consequence to anyone except possibly myself, certainly not to you for whom it was written. It might amuse you, but it won't change you, won't change anything for that matter. Still, it must be recorded to keep things straight. When people are related through time and a changing succession of intimacies, no two will have the same perception of what happened, or who said what, or which one was merely manipulated by circumstances; we determine our memory through a stained glass refracting the experience, and the stain on that glass is the stain of our desire, of our own requirements. We are like some deliberately deformed embryo with an arm growing where a leg should be, fingers invading our eyes. How can there be anything except pity and mercy for such deformity? We know how we ought to be, we have a clear view of the perfect form we violate consistently, time after time. We are neither exonerated by them nor relieved of the responsibility for these compelling deformations.

If we are guilty we are guilty and nothing can change that, even though we go to ingenious lengths to invent some mode of escape. We call it genetic, we blame the ribbons of cellular information passed on to us from an unknown ancestor born and raised in the ghettos of medieval Europe, or some landscape in the British Isles where they practised their abominations *sotto voce*, perpetuating a decency which had no more substance than propaganda. We cannot attribute our birth defects to some genetic imperfection, nor can we dismiss our obligations to each other because of certain hazardous conditions in our youth. My mother refused to kiss me when I came running after her, bursting with adulation yet unacceptable because my hands were dirty, I hadn't washed. No my canceled companion, I will understand distress imprinted by the reckless disasters percolating through childhood, but I will not accept the excuse. Sometimes we call it karma, that interfusion of genetic and historic circumstance which controls who and what we are, what we may become. It's the same fiction, a device to disguise the truth, to make us quiescent in the presence of misfortune or miscalculation, to absolve us from changing back to the unaltered embryo, the perfect form. Or destiny. You talked about destiny once in awhile, at least as

it touched the two of us. 'I knew you were my destiny,' you said, but that didn't interfere with your infidelities or the small betrayals, the petty denials when simple affirmation would have meant bliss instead of misery. We do, after all, write our own destiny, gripping the pen in our grubby fingers, hoping the composition will be admirable even though the hand that writes is the hand that betrays. If some precognitive wave smacked up against the rocky shores of your understanding, offering a gift on that crusty wave, why did you run from the tide, why turn your back on the little craft sent improbably across the sea to make your journey safe? If you had been ignorant, if you had not seen what you saw, that would have been one thing; how can you decline to know what you know? Were you as in love with desire as I have been with sorrow?

IV

There is another kind of invention, low on the Aristotelian scale because it is extraneous, like signs or emblems or tokens, an invention to account for the outrageous errors of destiny, the homicidal, genetic ironies which trip us early, middle and late as we strut our stuff from stage left to stage right. The tragic tale of sad Tristan and beautiful Isolde hinges on the fatal potion inadvertently drunk by the lovers on a dark and stormy sea, a potion which sealed their destiny, destroyed their good karma, and made a laughing stock of their illustrious genetic code. The fact is while Tristan was bringing the Fair by ship from Ireland to marry King Mark of Cornwall, his uncle, they fell in love, not an uncommon phenomenon for two young people at sea, bound together by the rigors of a long, arduous passage, there isn't much else to do. The lonely hours spent leaning against the rail staring into the sea, always too rough or too calm for a ship dependent on the wind, such hours are much more pleasantly spent in the teasing first moments of discovery and desire. This is just a game each one thought, a little light entertainment while I deliver/am delivered to good King Mark of Cornwall. 'My last chance,' thought Isolde, 'Before I'm given to a tired old man, old enough to be my father, maybe my grandfather.' 'I must look after this adorable young woman who is to be my revered uncle's bride. What harm to chat and sing and make love to her a little if it helps pass the time?' What harm indeed. By the time it was too late they discovered the seriousness of their enchanting game. Because they were fundamentally decent, both had been raised with strictest morality bolstered by royal duty, conscience demanded a plausible

explanation, or better still, an excuse for their gross betrayal. The trusted nurse, loyal servant to the princess, versed in the ancient Irish ways had procured a potion to insure the happiness of a young girl about to be tied in marriage to an old man, a potion mixed with a bottle of excellent wine left lying carelessly about. When Isolde was having the kind of fainting fit ladies in romances have, in life itself this malaise is mercifully rare, Tristan, who seems to have known his way around her cabin rather well by this time, Tristan brought the fatal bottle from which they both drank, although there is no record he was feeling faint. Instantly the game is lost and won. They are no longer responsible for the passion which will leak its poison drop by drop into the heart of the kingdom. Do they expect to exonerate themselves with this flimsy device?

And the king himself, is he not responsible? Didn't he knowingly send a handsome young man to accompany the fair young bride who is to be his queen? Did he not send Tristan as bait, promise of an available love waiting in the wings to inherit the bride and the throne? The ultimate betrayal though, is Tristan's. When he and Isolde, distracted by conscience and the niceties of a society which allows them free access to each other are driven to quarrel after quarrel, Tristan finally sails away across the seas to a distant land where he finds another love, another Isolde, this one of the Beautiful Hands. They marry, he is fatally wounded in battle and sends for the Fair, the only one who can save his life. He lies dying, waiting for the signal which will convey life or death, but there is a communications failure, mixed with a little trickery, a little sorcery, and the white sails for life are withheld while the black sails of death are hoisted on the ship carrying the Fair back to him. He dies, she dies, King Mark dies, even the second Isolde who loved him well, she dies too. What infidelity within infidelity. This too is the way of the world, nothing requiring a great precognitive flash to have predicted and prevented. See how we court the destiny we prescribe for ourselves and fall beneath the burden, lamenting our misfortune, our bad luck, another peculiar concept we rely on, another substitute for clarity. Not that certain individuals do not amass disaster on disaster, as through their lives were polarized by a positive attracting every negative particle drifting by. Some difficulties resonate more profoundly than others, not Tristan though, he was favored, fortune's darling until he met Isolde, and then everything started to come apart. Treachery is always accountable. Sooner or later every weakness, every frailty and self-indulgence exacts payment from our general reserves which carry no insurance against this kind of loss; they both paid a devastating price right from the start. It wasn't like that for us though, quite the opposite. Everything clicked into place for us, our lives fell together so easily, like water joining water, flowing

downstream in a single course as if we had begun and would certainly end in the same place. We suited each other, you and I, we wanted the same thing, brought complementary accomplishments to each other, gifts which only the weapons of time would have destroyed if we hadn't done that for ourselves. Aristotle was right about one thing at least, it takes only one flaw, one tragic weakness to ruin a great hero like Tristan, to reduce the noblest structure to dust. His very name is a monument to the sadness of his existence, the misery enshrined in deception and betrayal. And the old king, the mark, the victim, did he not pay full price for the fatuous scheme which brought them all down? Wasn't there an aging princess, some dowager he could have sent instead of a lusty young man? Isolde's family must share some of the blame for shipping her off like a piece of royal baggage, an international document with nothing but an old nurse to look after her. So what has destiny to do with irresponsibility and ignorance?