

SIX

Christmas Day is soft and wet, mild even for Philadelphia where it sometimes snows for Christmas, but not usually. An uncomfortable day — it always is. When we were children my father would take Aaron and me to a movie in the afternoon, a treat, often the only day in the year he took us out. My mother never came along, her treat was to stay home by herself. We walked the alien streets of our distant childhood through freezing cold and snow and the brilliant decorations none of us mentioned, as though the odd circumstances were enough, we weren't required to comment on foreign rituals deliberately excluding us. Their world which normally surrounded us unobtrusively, at this season, in particular on this day, reached in past the gates of indifference, locked or unlocked as events dictated, demanding attention if not acquiescence. The lights, the shining houses and allusions of happiness made insistent claims, embarrassing our refusal to play the game. Was this the first instruction, the earliest reminder to keep the world on hold, a separating mechanism which churned me like butter, making the rich cream solid and leaving behind a thin water, the ordinary, the common experience reaching up but never quite touching what mattered, what counted most? We played our own game, Aaron, my father and I, until I discovered myself the only survivor, a solitary player with no rules and no game. The Anglo-Saxon world meshed so adaptably with ours for the most part, when we came suddenly upon seams delineating differences, indicating yours not mine or mine not yours, we felt more inconvenienced than uncomfortable, or were we protected more than we

knew, more than we cared to admit? Then when we grew older, Aaron carefully choosing his legal, professional compound to reinforce the limits of birth, I began to merge naturally, inconspicuously, with a neutral culture that seemed oblivious to the separations of race, society, religion, and I moved from Christmas to Christmas like a blind man imagining the lights he had never seen. At college one or two friends invited me home for Christmas dinner, no one is supposed to be alone that day whatever the rest of the year entails, yet the sense of having been born in an alien kingdom persisted luridly for me during the holidays. Later, innocent, not so innocent shopkeepers would heighten the offence by insisting with each transaction, 'Have a nice holiday.' 'You too,' I'd respond enthusiastically, meanwhile thinking, 'Holiday, what holiday is this to me? The swine, I'd like to drive the knife through his heart that he sticks in mine.' This vicious inner dialogue was the product of less mature deliberations, even so the younger man, the artist I was instinctively forcing myself to become recognized a few seasons of truce, attempted truce that often ended in the severest misery, a dislocation which howled for the matinee accompanied by father and brother, compensation for being born a foreigner at home. During the years I found myself intimately involved with planning and parties and consuming all the Christmas drink two or three times before advent, I lived an intoxicating crescendo which promised some thrilling climax, satiation, a friendly glut that would still desire in a few moments of completion. Instead, by Christmas Eve I was abandoned, lost in a desert, I knew the oasis where a feast was laid, but I couldn't make my way to it; I knew the oasis where a choir was trained by Mozart and an orchestra rehearsed by Bach, but I couldn't find it. If we don't have the taste of sweetness in our mouth, endless descriptions of the sweet are beside the point. Now, now none of this has much to do with the secret, and nothing whatsoever with the secret guarded by secrets, this is only groundwork, a place where the soil might have been tilled, a peripheral note on the impossible analysis of oneness, inspired

perhaps by a lingering dualism, as if the orderly, determined rhythms of Mozart needed constant reparation, the certainty of a knife in the heart. My life with Laura was the most explicit exemplar, a nonpractising Christian whose devout shyness and intermittent apostasy had culminated in a fainthearted, anti-celebrant posture, she made Christmas a practical nightmare. From our first year together when she pointedly served hot dogs for Christmas dinner, the years offered successive intimations of her disaffection, tree, ornaments, gifts, with two notable exceptions, were rigorously proscribed. Except for Greta, her oldest friend, and Aaron, my almost Jewish brother, she would not permit gifts. Once in awhile I would try to buy her something, find a rare, a precious gift, hoping to shift her dismal refusal into something more tolerant, more consistent with the prevailing social mood, but she would have none of it, would acknowledge the gift lightly, a peculiar, hopeless smile, then leave it untouched for months until I moved the offending object to a dark corner, a closet, the total obscurity her decency demanded. I repeated the experiment a few times over the years, discouraged as much by what I thought might be some private wisdom I should tap into as by the embarrassment her rejection caused. We touched on this irritating question occasionally, 'Why do you insist on buying something for Greta and Aaron then?' I'd asked a few times. 'I've always bought Greta a gift since we were young, when she came from Germany with her parents and they had nothing; Aaron, well he seems to need it,' this was her usual explanation. She had no interest in a Christmas scenario and I never pushed my dreams across the barren flats of her exclusion. What seems important now, why I raise this obscure affliction which kept recurring like a tedious allergy is the recognition that my pointless alienation led, while I was still a young man wrestling upstream against all the traps and currents of misunderstanding, it led me to an intuitive grasp of *ahad*, oneness. If we subdivide reality by claiming my religion not yours, or my class not yours, my race not yours, that division damages what it rejects and itself as well, setting

limits where there are none, chipping away when molding on is required. The divine *ahad*, that total comprehension is reality, undivided essence in the endless multiplication tables of form, every creature, every creation. The essence whose form we are does not make bargains or contracts including me but excluding you; if it did it wouldn't be the source, the breath, the end. Whenever we identify ourselves as Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, as Polish, Armenian or Pakistani, even as poet, scientist or businessman, we deny that unity, that oneness by eliminating what doesn't look like us, talk like us or think like us, we betray justice, we betray truth and compassion by demanding uniqueness, by separating and dividing instead of uniting, comprehending.

The snow fell quietly last night

and all morning, with it came an iron fisted cold, the uncompromising elemental hostility no one escapes. I sit alone once more, no longer the selective isolation that once ruled my solitude, now merely a temporal consideration, keeping out of the cold. This morning I held the manuscript in my hands, not to read the poems or look at them falling like tears down the page, just to touch their sorrow, to feel it as my own. In the last few days I've had the curious sense my wife's image, immobilized I thought in a place between my eyes, a medallion like light that turned on automatically when summoned from the warm, dark niche where she lives, her face I thought was somehow less bright. Am I imagining it, or is there some subtle diminution, a lessening of intensity even when I try to keep the focus sharp and clear? Is this wisdom at last, restraining the sadness I've been clinging to as though it were a raft to carry me downstream the rest of my days? It seems we can no more cling to death than to life in this world. When we were separated it never crossed my mind she would die, would not live to grow old, there was always the thought buried somewhere, deliberately unacknowledged, some men

whose wives leave them think this way, she will have to come back one day, perhaps not now, perhaps not even soon yet one day, in a barely probable future the twin streams which flowed through the banks of our divided lives are destined to touch again, as though waters which once coursed indistinguishable must inevitably be reunited. How could they avoid it, how could the imprint, a common source, the mutual history, even the dreams they dreamed, how could that be set aside forever, ignored for a time, possibly that, it could be denied, surely though not forever. Laura would come back one day like water flowing to the sea, her destination and mine irrevocable in the common sands, the dust of our existence. As my paintings have incorporated the illusions of form and substance while I searched for the reality which is no illusion, the insubstantial dream of Laura's return, like my first Petrarchan fantasy, has woven itself into the canvas where I paint my life, stroke by stroke, shading from plane to plane, exploding each level with successive revelations of the next. Today they say my paintings seem to be of consequence, worth something not just in the dubious fluctuations of a marketplace where reputations are created and destroyed by the random streams washing our lives, but also in that virtually meaningless sphere where we lay claim to values, particularly those we espouse in principle and avoid in practice. It's hard to understand this because I have little awareness of painting conceptually, no matter how contradictory this sounds. I threw away a quantity of work when I was younger, often just before the paintings were finished, I threw them away because I found myself too unnerved by the disavowals the kind of thing I was trying to accomplish entailed. Today I would give so much to have them back, a molten chance to recover those red hot moments when indecision tampered with the incidentals, after I had painted out a succession of relevant forms to be left with a mere aggregate, a silent juxtaposition that simultaneously denied everything and accepted everything. When we begin to know how, we lose the opportunity for what Laura called accident, a gratuitous collision, a throw of

the dice which may begin something we had never expected, or end all that we hoped for. This nervous ambivalence is gone; I don't regret it except for the exhilarating uncertainty, can I do it, will I bring it off or am I dreaming the possibilities? It's hard to realize how much of life is a fantasy, the insubstantial stuff which looks like dreams, especially when we still have the nerve to do things by the seat of our pants, like flying in a dream: we know we'll fall if it's questioned for a moment, and yet the flight itself is irresistible, an elusive taunt, destiny daring us to admit it's just a dream. I don't paint like that any more, I can't, I've lost my inexperience.

And the snow kept falling

all day into the night again. I've been so restless in the last few months, as though escape from the house arrest in my room was inadequate, as though I need to escape the prison this city has become. There are no bars, the doors all open and close without locks, but I can't leave yet. California, I've been thinking about southern California with longing, it reminds me of Spain. In the past three or four weeks I've made and canceled seven different reservations, to Los Angeles, to Orange County, Santa Barbara, even their names make me feel nostalgic and warm, the curving rows of palm trees which look artificial, like sets for a movie, all the unfamiliar flowers I can't name, oak trees so unlike the immensely branching trees in the east, eloquent dry brown hills and the ocean everywhere, my definition of blue. I am prevented from leaving by the perfect understanding that wanting to escape the cold is only an excuse, not the reason, the real reasons are my life, and how can I escape my life? I tell myself if I could walk beside the pale blue Pacific with mountains behind me, beside me, I would be comforted, and possibly I would, although I know that pale sense of my life standing still, not aggressively engaged, would eventually brighten, overpowering the composition, too circumstantial to be

ignored, too vibrant to paint out. What can I say? I've done what I could, God alone can help me now. Is this my fate, to drift alone in His mercy until time throws back the doors and shoves me out? If I don't know how to alter my course, if I cannot myself change the changelessness then I must wait, allow it to be done, hold onto the praise and surrender which emancipate me wherever I am — an easy prescription, hard to stick with it, essential for compliance with the divine wisdom embodied in the Sufi whose light besieges my recurring darkness.

The snow keeps falling,

tears I must incorporate, part of the drama, her story, mine, ours separately and together, the fantasy revealed as fantasy when you step back far enough to see what must be seen. I've been trying to remember which, in all the years we spent together, were best. Was it the early period marked equally by the intensity of our passion for each other and the inability to weave two loose strands into one? It couldn't have been that time when the upheavals between us were so volcanic, their residue, the ash fell down equally on the purity and the passion, when then? The quieter middle years when Laura seemed content enough to live her life beside me, except, except for dark moments that could not be accounted for? No, even I was too dissatisfied then, with my work, the routine course our unexpectedly quiet life seemed to impose, almost to dictate. Then was it the years in the country where we both tasted, together for the first time, the sweetness, the bliss we had quietly hungered for, especially Laura, eager to reorganize her small business, the agency which had grown more solid, to establish a base away from the pressures of city life, were those pastoral years our best? I used to think so, now looking back I'm not sure, were there not fissures running like mute calamities through that green and pleasant land? Certainly not those last bleak years when Laura's discontent was evident,

a fault line ready to erupt with the slightest dislocation of the warring elements. Is it illusory, that residual impression I've kept, if we sifted the bad times from the good, what was good was so good the rest doesn't matter at all? It is a dream after all, but you only find that out when you wake up, if you wake up. The solitude in my room, several introspective years, half running away, half standing still at last to see what I had to see, without distraction, without distortion, what should I think of them? Sometimes we need isolation from the world to see it clearly, assess it, a performance at best, a good play well directed although often badly acted, sometimes we need to know with clarity and fervent conviction that's all it can be no matter how seductive the painted sets, how clever the choreography and exquisite the music, that's all it can be, a great show. The truth lies elsewhere, caught in the light, the only letter a body of light, the single stroke, the silent line.

A medallion set in gold leaf

like the sun, those years in our drafty old house still come back to me, good times in spite of the evidence. Laura took her best photographs there I think, came closest to becoming the artist she wanted to find in herself, fitfully picking at a book she never figured out how to write, dreaming of the movie she wanted to make, her Four Seasons. We were both infatuated with our little piece of the world, nothing extraordinary, an undulating landscape you almost had to train your eye to perceive. In winter the curved line of naked poplars which grew so fast you could measure time against their changing forms would blow in the wind, they stood at the top of a rise behind the house, not quite a hill, merely a rise marking the property line. On sunny days their shadow laced the snow beneath them, a pattern of black and grey and white I would paint again and again in the changing light, trying to catch the brittle twitch, the movement suggested by diverging lines pointing back to themselves, a ballet,

an abstract movement. When the cold January winds blew hard at night sealing us into that icy paradise Laura's restlessness would disappear, seduced by the convincing limits elemental forces conveyed, lulled by the golden impossibility our isolation from everything not there at that moment prescribed. They were in fact good moments, those silent reclamations from the normal wreck and passage of time, the unequivocal, the uncomplicated. I painted all the short daylight hours, sometimes without a break, while Laura kept herself busy or unoccupied in a thousand ways I never bothered to notice. It was safe, complete, just Laura and my work, no interruptions, no one ventured forth against the righteous winter architecture, no one challenged the lacy solitude we built in that palace. As much as I disliked the cold, Laura never seemed to mind, perhaps because she was born to it too, enjoying the rigor in a way I never did, the winters became for me a time of unquestioned gratitude, when life presented itself as a seamless whole, a unitary digression to be offered back without reserve. Was God pleased with us merely because we accepted what was given, is that all it takes? I've never worked harder, I've never worked better. A few winters frozen bright and hard in my memory and a few hundred paintings scattered across the country now, except for a handful I could not part with, these are gifts I have no need to examine, and the time with Laura, can I not accept this in the same way, let it be, let that perfection speak for itself? Can I not have our undivided time ring its changeless clarity without speculating or comparing or wondering, what difference can it make if I was deceived or not? And the deep green summers we dropped into, a touch of the kaleidoscope as we shifted through a brief shower, the brilliant springtime exploding all at once like guns fired in quick succession, and suddenly it was summer, miraculous, comforting, warm with a magnanimous heat that could only generate kindness, a voluptuous compassion for all living things. Those long summer days and brief, star filled nights I painted too, overwhelmed with a luxuriousness I could never account for, a richness that

poured explicit detail into my work effacing the anxiety Laura's inattention, her recurring distractedness would cause. My hair turned grey while she remained fair, and the summers remained an unexplored wilderness Laura could exploit but never destroy. The summers and their memory from year to year are strung like beads on my *tasbih*, each identical to the one beside it yet unique, touched briefly, fervently, then let go quickly to reach for the next, a miser fingering the jewels in his collection one by one, a treasure never to be annotated or recorded. In the summertime we had visitors, even Aaron came one day, my shy, unlikely brother whose speech was sometimes so hesitant he almost seemed to stammer, but he had no doubts, not about himself, his life and his rather tepid beliefs which never troubled him and certainly never intruded upon his life. His visits were so rare during our life together, we, I think, visited him twice in all those years, they were always memorable. He came once when summer was green and full, everything accomplished, nothing yet taken away, he came to tell us in his own disjointed way that a marriage which had endured so many years was ending. I remembered his announcement of that marriage at dinner, how many years before, we were both still living at home, 'Irene and I will be married next month,' he had said solemnly. 'O,' I could not resist blurting into the silence which followed, 'I guess it's because you have to.' Furious but honest he answered, 'In fact, yes, we do.' My mother turned pale and my father said nothing. Over the years however, and my brother's apparently endless proliferation, our parents had long since forgotten their distress. This good brother whose children and marriage formed an integral part of what he became never quite forgot my indiscretion, he could no more pardon that than he could pardon my talent which, I think it fair to say, he loathed. Why did he come on that bright summer day, as alive now as a critical turn of phrase in a complicated text, why did he come? Surely not for sympathy, Aaron was always so self-sufficient he never looked to anyone, apparently not even to God Himself. 'Irene has left

me,' he told us in his unemphatic way, 'She took a job as a waitress and left the house.' 'What about the kids?' Laura asked. They had five, all different ages from about six to twenty something. 'They're with me, at home for now, I guess we'll have to sell the house.' 'Then what?' I asked. He answered matter-of-factly, without any emotion or concern either of us could detect, 'Well the older ones are at college anyhow, except for Jimmy,' Jimmy had left university to dedicate himself to the promotion of transcendental meditation, 'And I suppose Irene will have the two younger ones eventually, right now she doesn't want any of them.' After a pause, some hesitation, 'She seems a little disturbed you know, psychologically I mean, nervous. She's on tranquilizers of course, they don't seem to have helped.' If my phlegmatic brother had any difficulties with this domestic upheaval he gave no indication, 'I've had to hire a housekeeper for now, she seems quite competent. Once the house is sold and the kids are settled I'll find myself an apartment, probably be nice for a change.' Just like that he wrote it off, the good lawyer acting judiciously to settle things, what did it matter if the life thrown into disarray was his, do what is required, put your affairs in order and everything quietly falls into place, a new place of course, but in an orderly way. At the time I remember thinking of the yellow notebook Greta had already left with us, and although I'd done little more than glance at the poems in those days, I do recall, almost involuntarily, comparing my brother's cool disposition of his life with the weeping that rang like a bell from every page in the book. As for my own response to these questions, how gracious is the mercy keeping our future hidden from view. Who could endure discomforts with equanimity if we also had to endure their foreknowledge? I saw Irene once in a tight beige and brown waitress costume, looking tall and gaunt, her anxiety badly concealed. 'I had to get away from him, out of that house, all of it. My degree in sociology was nullified by twenty odd years of child rearing. This,' indicating her mean apparel, 'This was the only job I could get.' We never saw her again, she

didn't come to Laura's funeral when her former husband, my brother, sought to offer comfort, reminding me my wife had fallen in love with another man. 'These things happen Ilya, don't hold it against her.' My answer, 'Why should I, there's nothing to forgive, I always did.' Except for one bitter moment when I looked at her and swore. How much more we have, like the secret within a secret accessible to all, yet certain big things, certain important things are not turned loose, they're guarded closely inside high stone walls, illusions which crumble like dust the instant we perceive they are nothing more than interlocking fantasies to keep us busy, and we lap it up diligently, escaping the built-in implications, children absorbing pleasure while evading the propaganda. In some ways I suppose that's as it should be, although a few of us, at least a few, feel the need to examine each tear falling down the page and make the right inference, obliged to see through the mechanisms sustaining both happiness and sadness, see through their dust to make out the closely guarded secrets turning out not to be secrets after all. If they were, how could we affirm the truth? We couldn't unless it was already known, and there is more, like a January thaw, release from the unexpected torment of a frozen earth, from nights when isolation cannot be defined only dreamed, release on the streets which lie suddenly open, available avenues to be discovered, even exhausted. How deceptive our expectations can be, limiting the imaginable so that when truth comes we disavow it, we say no, I cannot lay claim to that, this is beyond what I've been conditioned to receive, I can no more accept this than the angels who sometimes make themselves known. Then perhaps what we try to reject surrounds us so convincingly, aligning with the only peace we've ever known, then ah we say, this too I accept, this too I incorporate in the body of light, only it's the other way around, that incorporates us. It may begin in laughter, it may begin in pain, for some the roots of pain are such a powerful stimulant they require nothing more, for some this is nonsense, perversion. Wherever it starts doesn't matter as long as we are brought to the threshold of

the king; anything can take us there, but the king alone will open the door. Some petitioners are lucky, their suit is granted at once, some must knock and weep forever. That's the reason Greta gave me the poems, in her own peculiar way she knew Laura would face an impossible ascent which somehow must be climbed, while I would find the stony mountain path that wanders through dark ravines, dead ends and invisible rocky heights. If we have the right understanding, if we assume the right to be right, capitulating to a divine luminosity which makes speculation unnecessary, quiet hints along the way are so radiant nothing can keep us from the journey, nothing can take its place. We do our work, paint pictures, investigate neutrinos, buy and sell worldly commodities, yet the intoxicating pleasure goes only so far, like a drug we're habituated to, sometimes quickly, sometimes after a long, apparently harmless initiation the satisfaction becomes unsatisfactory; even if desire itself could be emptied, nothing supplants the revelatory smack pushing us farther and farther into the secret, the mystery within the secret, the golden threshold whose doorway is survival. Ascension through levels of wisdom we are fit to receive is an inexhaustible joy, the philosopher's stone, a conversion of dross to purity which never ends as we measure accomplishment against fathomless perfection, the end without end. The bond which united us in this pursuit was a key to our marriage, more powerful than the marriage itself. Perhaps this accounts for the certainty that what lay between us could be dismantled but never destroyed, perhaps this explains why, even during the years before her death when she refused to speak to me at all, refused any except the rudest communications, I always searched her messages for hidden clues addressing anything buried in our mortared past, the investment of my life in hers and hers in mine which time or circumstances could change but never cancel. Divorce was the first phase of death, like dying with unaccountable reprieves, dead yes, but under conditions specifically defined, there were limits to this death, limits which might be breached, possibly even bridged. It was neither absolute

nor final, merely finished. I could still after all, phone her, speak to her, except of course, that I couldn't. This means I wouldn't, if I had some outrage might have been exacted. At the end death itself dictated the terms and Laura phoned me, needed me as completely as I needed her during the years of our separation, death became our common denominator, the name we had in common, an unsentimental arbitrator settling once and for all what we owed each other. When the protracted sale of our house in the country ended, Laura did buy my half immediately after Michel sold his violin, I thought sadly as I signed the documents, received her cheque, there would be no excuse for even the minimal, the sometimes brutal exchanges our little piece of business had allowed, there was no reason ever to hear from her again, no reason in the world where she lived now with another husband and their baby. I don't care to think of that child, hers, not mine, her blood flowing through a body deliberately not mine. And yet a week, a mere seven days after those sad thoughts erupted involuntarily, she phoned me, Laura phoned me as if it were the most normal thing, as if there had not been an interval of years when this was clearly impossible, fifty-one tears dividing the pages of my life, as if those poems had never sounded on the strings destiny tuned till they broke. Laura called me from our house in the country, now hers, where she lived with another man and their child, hundreds of miles away on the map, as close as the opening and closing of each valve in my heart, every beat as the blood laid claim to its life. For an hour she made pleasant inquiries, what was I painting, not much at all, why not, O a quiet period, time to rethink, re-create, and what about Aaron, my brother whom she loved with a curiously detached amusement, almost self-deprecation, how was my brother Aaron, had I heard from Irene or seen the nieces and nephews, all quite grown up now? I told her nothing, how could I when I wasn't sure if the next breath would come, when it seemed I might be strangled or choke before my lungs could admit air. In this suspended state, hardly able to breathe, I kept asking myself why she had

called, what it could mean. I managed to say a few words about the child, Aaron had broken the news of her existence only weeks before, too troubled on my behalf to mention it sooner. A protective, unyielding note edged into her voice as Laura made a sparse reply, indicating with the reluctance to say much this baby had nothing to do with me or the part of her which had to do with me. I accepted that. When Aaron told me about the child, to give myself recovery time as I took in the information I asked him, 'And Laura,' I said, 'How does she feel about it?' 'O terrific,' he answered, 'She's like an earth mother.' I didn't understand what he meant but wouldn't pursue his meaning. 'She's phoned me once or twice, I guess because Irene and I had so many she figures I must know all about it, like when the baby rolled out of bed, they do this you know, that kind of thing.' Laura was clearly not interested in saying anything about the child. Just as I was beginning to wonder if I shouldn't politely end the conversation, assume her phone call meant nothing other than a signal to resume more decent relations, she asked about Greta. 'Yes, Greta is here in Philadelphia still talking about going to the Middle East again. She's looking after her old teacher, the doctor she was so devoted to a number of years ago, he's very old now, dying I think of lung disease.' Laura fastened onto that quickly, 'Lung disease, what do you mean?' 'He keeps getting pneumonia, every time he's left a little weaker, a little more vulnerable than before. Besides he's asthmatic, has emphysema, what else I'm not sure, anyhow he's totally bedridden as far as I know. Greta almost never goes out, neither do I for that matter, so we rarely see each other, but we talk on the phone occasionally.' Laura's interest was more than aroused, she wanted to know everything about the old doctor neither of us had ever met. 'I've tried to get hold of Greta several times and all I get is an answering machine, she hasn't called me back.' 'Well you know Greta better than I do Laura, you know what she's like, obsessive, if she's interested in something, someone, she's consumed, has no reserves, nothing left over. It's like that with the doctor now,

she's pouring her life into sustaining his, she has no time for anyone.' There was a pause while Laura must have readied herself to say what had to be said, 'I particularly need her advice right now you see, I just found out I have lung cancer.' 'Laura, no!' It was an involuntary shout that could not be stifled, then imposing restraint, a physical suppression I could feel cut off the sounds in my throat, realizing I must compose myself for her sake, I said quietly, softly, 'Laura, my God, I'm so sorry my darling, I'm so sorry. What happened, are you in pain?' 'No, no, there's no pain, that's the irony of it, I feel quite well in fact.' 'How did you find out?' 'O the usual, I coughed up some blood, Michel insisted I see a doctor, they did tests. It seems, as far as they can tell, to be just in the middle lobe of the right lung; they want to cut it out.' 'Are there alternatives?' 'That's what I've been trying to find out, why I need to consult Greta and her old doctor. Didn't he specialize in pulmonary disorders?' 'I think he did.' 'Between them there ought to be a mountain of useful information, that's what I need right now, information to help us make an intelligent decision.' Suddenly we were back on familiar ground, the comfortable solidity of something we had been good at, analyzing, examining, turning a question every which way to find the right answer, the solution which must present itself if we pursued our objective skillfully. Glad of a refuge from the unspeakable pain her illness caused, it felt as though my own right lung collapsed with her words, glad also to recognize she felt as happy as I did stumbling across an old playing field where the rules of the game had never changed, I began to address each issue with the vigor and energy we always brought to any kind of problem that interested us. We were home. This was the stance Laura also adopted, so filled with courage and curiosity her investigations drove away whatever dark thoughts might have blotted out the light. This brightness, this courage filled with God's grace was what she showed me during the remaining weeks of her life. It never occurred to me she would not live, that death would take her from me in one devastating sweep

which ends all reprieve. In this coda, this little tag attached to my life she was restored, given back as I had known she would be, yet I never saw her face again, not in life, only in death. Would I have tried to see her if I had known? I think so, even though it would have been complicated, awkward. The only thing keeping me away during those last five weeks was the certainty I would see her, later, when she recovered. Perhaps I will. That wisdom whose luminosity, whose resplendence I have still to taste as my own, that brilliance circling the perfection where we converge, all separation healed in light, that light shines with the clarity of soul touching soul, dissolved in soul. God grant her peace.