

Last Cigarette

1

I am sick, alas, & you are the physician. Description is my favorite part of a book. I have written whole books in which no one says anything. If you ask me what happened I'd tell you you were wrong. It's angelic to harbor a grievance for something that never happened. I tell a few lies to preserve my secrets. A nude scene without the credentials of a firebug, signed *anon*.

2

Someone called & said their neighbor was harboring fugitives. "Don't tell them I told you," he said, & hung up. I saw a skirt hanging on a clothesline from the window of a train. The prisoner unfastened his shackles when the turnkey was sleeping. You can tell the police your story but don't expect them to listen. Stop the car at a crowded intersection & take off your clothes. It doesn't matter where I am if you aren't here.

3

At night, we fall asleep listening to the radio & dream of snakes. My favorite song is "Backstabbers" by the O'Jays. There was cat food on a plate and dust in the air and from the bedroom window you could see office buildings, water towers and bridges. A scratchy record is our only testimony to regret. It was possible to dance by oneself, and in this way attract numerous partners, who would circle around you in the center of the living room without touching. Then a slow dance comes on and everyone evaporates into thin air.

4

But I never wanted to be the person who judged anyone, or be judged in return. It didn't matter to me, if the earth opened & we fell into the chasm, who was saved, in the end, who was left standing at the final buzzer. There was a way of taking your thoughts to a point where they existed outside your mind, like colors in a prism when you hold it up to the light. You have

to hold on to the light a little while longer; only then can you unfasten your cufflinks, take off your shirt, & get into bed.

5

My eyes grow tired during the day. I used to stay up all night but now I get tired at midnight or even earlier. A wave of sleep comes over me & I close my eyes. My mind wanders as I read. But as soon as I get into bed & turn off the light I begin thinking of things that happened in the past. Some of the memories cause pain, but most of them are pleasureable. The reason I want to remember them is to relive the pleasure. But the painful memories resonate as well. (Sometimes I have to get up & take a pill to put me to sleep.)

6

It's all we can do to put the pieces back together, a random unit where even the stars are out of focus, & the shadows fall like shards of glass across the empty lot behind my house. As a child, that's where I went, to pick pears off a tree. If I didn't pick them they would just ripen & fall to the ground. Recapture the moment, a kind of still life, before it dies. Knock on someone's door & ask for something hot to drink against the long night ahead. We can sleep the sleep of forgetfulness & never wake up. A man comes into a diner & holds a napkin to his lips. A swelling around the side of the mouth in the shape of a question mark, but no answer.

7

Tell me something you never told anyone. The security guard monitors the occupants of the elevators from the lobby. Hold the door open for the woman with packages. You give up part of your body to someone who needs it. You give away what you value most to someone who doesn't care. A list of words in different languages that mean the same thing. Faithful light of morning with the wind in our faces.

8

Number holds sway above the flux.
Progress is not of the mind
but the hand.
Principles come first; deduction follows.
All the notes can be played at one time.

The footfall of a cat.
The roots of a rock.
The head of a worm.
The breath of a fish.

The Galapagos islands: a state of mind.
Beware of still waters & overly obedient children.

The colors of her dress merged with the landscape.
It was something Lauren Bacall might have worn in 1950.

9

This is just the beginning of someone else's story. If we make a mistake the first time, we can try again. If we lose our balance we might fall to the bottom. Being in denial is just another form of stupidity. The doctor who was on duty wrote me a perscription for pain killers. I offer my guests a plate of bowtie cookies. It occurs to me that my audience consists of no one but you.

10

Come, let us make a human being
in our own image. You can see it in a new light
now that it's already happened.

If your mother calls I'll tell her you're still asleep.
We all have two points of reference:
maternal, paternal,

but distance is everything,
a name you can't remember.
Weight on eyelids of first spring rain.

Mothwings flattened against a bulb.
A pitchfork leaning against the side of a barn.
Colored ribbons, fusilage, the map of intransigence.

Islands off the coast of Alaska where
we can go for a holiday. A voice on the intercom:
is there a doctor in the house?

11

All transitions are seamless, & this is true of the body as well. It requires you to put one foot in front of another--& when everyone stops moving you continue, you go on. We have another plan & it isn't plan B. Fish dart out of the crevices when they

see you coming. There are stones embedded in the surface of the reef. This is the park where I played after school as a child. This is the room where I lost my virginity. This is where the banks of the river overflow.

Coda

He didn't think of himself as a separate person. When he had something to tell someone he told it to them in his head. It was possible there was nothing in his head but these voices. He was attached to his mother by strings that were invisible to everyone but himself. Whenever his mother left the house he followed behind her. As he walked he had conversations with all the people he used to know, his high school teachers, his friends from nursery school. Sometimes a gypsy in a long skirt was dancing on a stage in his head & he was standing in the background clapping his hands. The swirl of her skirt hypnotized him. It consisted of numerous multi-colored patches stitched together & she had a disorganized look in her eyes. She stamped her shoes on the floor of the stage & shouted out words to the audience. The words seemed to be coming from the depth of her being, some inner core. It was an animal sound, & combined with the loud banging of her feet, reminded him of a herd of horses rushing along the edge of a canyon, a virtual stampede.

New Way

There was a new way of loving that no one told me about

There were people who knew how to kiss differently
& in different places

The only way she could reach her lover was by swimming
across the moat

The plane landed in Athens but he refused to get off

There was a way of loving that you couldn't put into words

My head reaches up to your waist when I stand on my toes

It was the type of town where people sat on benches & let
their hair grow down to their ankles & talked about the golden
age as if nothing else ever happened

There was a time when people said hello to strangers on the
street & then laughed at them behind their backs
when no one was looking

You resist saying what you mean, as if the opposite of what
you want is always true

You say, "May I be excused," & leave the room

There was a way of loving that involved staying awake
for days at a time

He repossessed the car as if it was a person who couldn't breathe

There was a way of thinking that involved accomplishing
something that was akin to loving

He imagined he was making love to X when he was in bed with Y

We had turned the corner into a new life & all we could do was
look over our shoulders at the debris on the highway

I put you on a pedestal & watched it collapse beneath the waves

There was a taste on my lips that resembled nails in a jar
as if the woman working in the hardware store had
kissed me by mistake

Perhaps there's a place no one knows about where we can
act out our fears

Write a simple sentence without using the possessive

I saw where happiness could be more than an “outlook” on
life but a whole career in which one made career moves that
invoked the brittleness of dead leaves & spoke in tongues
without retribution

You could feel trapped--at the crossroads--point A,
point B--with nowhere to go

Let's meet at midnight on the grass behind the stadium

Tantalus serves the body of his son Pelops to the Gods

We come from a strange country, a land with no name

Helen & Paris spent their first night together in this bed

The branches of the palm tree resemble the folds in a fan

I sit on the terrace & stare at the fan-like branches
of the palm tree

The leaves are shining in the light from the moon
between the branches

The plane for Athens is leaving in a few minutes

One might say that all art is about relationships--even lines
drawn on a canvas--vertical/horizontal--male or female

Today people died in bombings in Indonesia, Russia & Palestine

I don't mean to upset you, my darling, but the version of war we
read about in the newspapers involves people banging down the
door of another person's house, shooting the men, raping
the women, skewering the babies

Lightning sets fire to distant windowpanes

You can always take an elevator if you're too tired to climb
the stairs

The people on the side of the road were fighting over
a bottle of water

She took the bottle of water out of her backpack & shared it
with the strangers

It's rare to find anyone who's willing to share food with you

We have so little food & water--how can we share it with other
people?

It's just a matter of time before there's no more water

You can see them up ahead, the people with guns on the highway, looking
for water

Sometimes you have to do something radical, cut off an arm or
leg, if you want to move forward

Take what I have to offer, whether you like it or not

He used the pronoun "I" but no longer refers to himself

If no one changes into someone else's clothing they will
redress the situation by eating alone

Rilke had more rapport with dogs than with children

Something I ate last night made me feel sick this morning

Emptiness divided by itself, the moonlight at the window

You can't prove what you don't feel to anyone but yourself,
but others will know you by the things you say

Maybe there was a dog more human than any friend or
a cat to let out when the light grew dim

No more in sunset diatribe overlooking the dock but in simple
plush & quiet of daily life can we apathetic double our
mode of attack on the model of empathy without dependency
on what's known

My favorite classic comics are Prisoner of Zenda and Lorna Doone

Everyone with any money has left the city for the summer

A man came out of the woods to help me fix a flat

The divorce between appearance & reality was settled out of court

I paid some bills this morning, but I'm still falling behind

The cold sun harbors loss at the foot of my chair

There were geese flying over the pond & the waitress with
butterfly earrings brought us coffee