

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE RIVER

*T*his, then, is the terrain. The steepest mountains, thickly covered, where huge, sharp rocks might pose the greatest danger and where only the bravest, surest, most deeply arched of human feet will venture, where a large stream might flow, and, flowing perilously, having only a deep ambition to see itself mighty and powerful, bends and curves and dips in many directions, making a welcome and easy path for each idle rill and babbling brook, each trickle of rain fallen on land that lies sloping; and that stream, at last swelled to a great, fast, flowing body of water, falls over a ledge with a roar, a loudness that is more than the opposite of complete silence, then rushes over dry, flat land in imperfect curves—curves as if made by a small boy playfully dragging a toy behind him—then hugs closely to the

paths made, ruthlessly conquering the flat plain, the steep ridge, the grassy bed; all day, all day, a stream might flow so, and then it winds its way to a gorge in the earth, a basin of measurable depth and breadth, and so collects itself in a pool: now comes the gloaming, for day will end, and the stream, its flow stilled and gathered up, so that trees growing firmly on its banks, their barks white, their trunks bent, their branches covered with leaves and reaching up, up, are reflected in the depths, awaits the eye, the hand, the foot that shall then give all this a meaning.

But what shall that be? For now here is a man who lives in a world bereft of its very nature. He lies on his bed as if alone in a small room, waiting and waiting and waiting. For what does he wait? He is not yet complete, so he cannot conceive of what it is he waits for. He cannot conceive of the fields of wheat, their kernels ripe and almost bursting, and how happy the sight will make someone. He cannot conceive of the union of opposites, or, for that matter, their very existence. He cannot conceive of flocks of birds in migratory flight, or that night will follow day and season follow season in a seemingly endless cycle, and the beauty and the pleasure and the purpose that might come from all this. He cannot conceive of the wind that ravages the coastline, casting asunder men and cargo, temporarily interrupting the smooth flow of commerce. He can-

not conceive of the individual who, on looking up from some dreary, everyday task, is struck just then by the completeness of the above and the below and his own spirit resting in between; or how that same individual, suddenly rounding a corner, catches his own reflection, transparent and suspended in a pane of glass, and so smiles to himself with shy admiration. He cannot conceive of the woman and the child at play—an image so often regarded as a symbol of human contentment; or how calamity will attract the cold and disinterested gaze of children. He cannot conceive of a Sunday: the peal of church bells, the sound of seraphic voices in harmony, the closeness of congregation, the soothing words of praise and the much longed for presence of an unearthly glory. He cannot conceive of how emotions, varying in color and intensity, will rapidly heighten, reach an unbearable pitch, then finally explode in the silence of the evening air. He cannot conceive of the chance invention that changes again and again and forever the great turbulence that is human history. Not for him can thought crash over thought in random and violent succession, leaving his brain suffused in contradiction. He sits in nothing, this man: not in a full space, not in emptiness, not in darkness, not in light or glimmer of. He sits in nothing, in nothing, in nothing.



Look! A man steps out of bed, a good half hour after his wife, and washes himself. He sits down on a chair and at a table that he made with his own hands (the tips of his fingers are stained a thin chocolate brown from nicotine). His wife places before him a bowl of porridge, some cheese, some bread that has been buttered, two boiled eggs, a large cup of tea. He eats. The goats, the sheep, the cows are driven to pasture. A dog barks. His child now enters the room. Walking over, she bends to kiss his hand, which is resting on his knee, and he, waiting for her head to come up, kisses her on the forehead with lips he has purposely moistened. "Sir, it is wet," she says. And he laughs at her as she dries her forehead with the back of her hand. Now, clasping his wife to him, he bids her goodbye, opens the door, and stops. For what does he stop? What does he see? He sees before him himself, standing in sawdust, measuring a hole, just dug, in the ground, putting decorative grooves in a bannister, erecting columns, carving the head of a cherub over a door, lighting a cigarette, pursing his lips, holding newly planed wood at an angle and looking at it with one eye closed; standing with both hands in his pockets, the thumbs out, and rocking back and forth on his heels, he surveys a small accomplishment—a last nail driven in just so. Crossing and recrossing the threshold, he watches the sun, a violent red, set on the horizon, he hears

the birds fly home, he sees the insects dancing in the last warmth of the day's light, he hears himself sing out loud:

*Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh;
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.*

All this he sees (and hears). And who is this man, really? So solitary, his eyes sometimes aglow, his heart beating at an abnormal rate with a joy he cannot identify or explain. What is the virtue in him? And then again, what can it matter? For tomorrow the oak will be felled, the trestle will break, the cow's hooves will be made into glue.

But so he stands, forever, crossing and recrossing the threshold, his head lifted up, held aloft and stiff with vanity; then his eyes shift and he sees and he sees, and he is weighed down. First lifted up, then weighed down—always he is so. Shall he seek comfort now? And in what? He seeks out the living fossils. There is the shell of the pearly nautilus lying amidst colored chalk and powdered ink and India rubber in an old tin can, in memory of a day spent blissfully at the sea. The flatworm is now a parasite. Reflect. There is the earth, its surface apparently stilled, its atmosphere hospitable. And yet here stand pile upon pile of rocks of an enormous size,

riven and worn down from the pressure of the great seas, now receded. And here the large veins of gold, the bubbling sulfurous fountains, the mountains covered with hot lava; at the bottom of some caves lies the black dust, and below that rich clay sediment, and trapped between the layers are filaments of winged beasts and remnants of invertebrates. "And where shall I be?" asks this man. Then he says, "My body, my soul." But quickly he averts his eyes and feels himself now, hands pressed tightly against his chest. He is standing on the threshold once again, and, looking up, he sees his wife holding out toward him his brown felt hat (he had forgotten it); his child crossing the street, joining the throng of children on their way to school, a mixture of broken sentences, mispronounced words, laughter, budding malice, and energy abundant. He looks at the house he has built with his own hands, the books he has read standing on shelves, the fruit-bearing trees that he nursed from seedlings, the larder filled with food that he has provided. He shifts the weight of his body from one foot to the other, in uncertainty but also weighing, weighing . . . He imagines that in one hand he holds emptiness and yearning and in the other desire fulfilled. He thinks of tenderness and love and faith and hope and, yes, goodness. He contemplates the beauty in the common thing: the sun rising up out of the huge, shimmering expanse of water that is the

sea; it rises up each day as if made anew, as if for the first time. "Sing again. Sing now," he says in his heart, for he feels the cool breeze at the back of his neck. But again and again he feels the futility in all that. For stretching out before him is a silence so dreadful, a vastness, its length and breadth and depth immeasurable. Nothing.



The branches were dead; a fly hung dead on the branches, its fragile body fluttering in the wind as if it were remnants of a beautiful gown; a beetle had fed on the body of the fly but now lay dead, too. Death on death on death. Dead lay everything. The ground stretching out from the river no longer a verdant pasture but parched and cracked with tiny fissures running up and down and into each other; and, seen from high above, the fissures presented beauty: not a pleasure to the eye but beauty all the same; still, dead, dead it was. Dead lay everything that had lived and dead also lay everything that would live. All had had or would have its season. And what should it matter that its season lasted five billion years or five minutes? There it is now, dead, vanished into darkness, banished from life. First living briefly, then dead in eternity. How vainly I struggle against this. Toil, toil, night and day. Here a house is built. Here a monument is erected to commemorate something called a good deed, or

even in remembrance of a woman with exceptional qualities, and all that she loved and all that she did. Here are some children, and immeasurable is the love and special attention lavished on them. Vanished now is the house. Vanished now is the monument. Silent now are the children. I recall the house, I recall the monument, I summon up the children from the eternity of darkness, and sometimes, briefly, they appear, though always slightly shrouded, always as if they had emerged from mounds of ashes, chipped, tarnished, in fragments, or large parts missing: the ribbons, for instance, gone from the children's hair. These children whom I loved best—better than the monument, better than the house—once were so beautiful that they were thought unearthly. Dead is the past. Dead shall the future be. And what stands before my eyes, as soon as I turn my back, dead is that, too. Shall I shed tears? Sorrow is bound to death. Grief is bound to death. Each moment is not as fragile and fleeting as I once thought. Each moment is hard and lasting and so holds much that I must mourn for. And so what a bitter thing to say to me: that life is the intrusion, that to embrace a thing as beauty is the intrusion, that to believe a thing true and therefore undeniable, that is the intrusion; and, yes, false are all appearances. What a bitter thing to say to me, I who for time uncountable have always seen myself as newly born, filled with a

truth and a beauty that could not be denied, living in a world of light that I called eternal, a world that can know no end. I now know regret. And that, too, is bound to death. And what do I regret? Surely not that I stand in the knowledge of the presence of death. For knowledge is a good thing; you have said that. What I regret is that in the face of death and all that it is and all that it shall be I stand powerless, that in the face of death my will, to which everything I have ever known bends, stands as if it were nothing more than a string caught in the early-morning wind.

Now! There lived a small creature, and it lived as both male and female inside a mound that it made on the ground, its body wholly covered with short fur, broadly striped, in the colors field-yellow and field-blue. It hunted a honeybee once, and when the bee, in bee anger and fright, stung the creature on the corner of the mouth, the pain was so unbearably delicious that never did this creature hunt a honeybee again. It walked over and over the wide space that surrounded the mound in which it lived. As it walked over and over the wide ground that surrounded the mound in which it lived, it watched its own feet sink into the grass and heard the ever so slight sound the grass made as it gave way to the pressure, and as it saw and heard, it felt a pleasure unbearably delicious, and, each time, the pleasure unbearably delicious was new to this creature. It lived so, bank-

ing up each unbearably delicious pleasure in deep, dark memory unspeakable, hoping to perhaps one day throw the memories into a dungeon, or burn them on an ancient pyre, or banish them to land barren, but now it kept them in this way. Then all its unbearably delicious pleasure it kept free, each thing taken, time in, time out, as if it were new, just born. It lived so in a length of time that may be measured to be no less than the blink of an eye, or no more than one hundred millenniums. This creature lived inside and outside its mound, remembering and forgetting, pain and pleasure so equally balanced, each assigned to what it judged a natural conclusion, yet one day it did vanish, leaving no sign of its existence, except for a small spot, which glowed faintly in the darkness that surrounded it. I divined this, and how natural to me that has become. I divined this, and it is not a specter but something that stood here. I show it to you. I yearn to build a monument to it, something of dust, since I now know—and so soon, so soon—what dust really is.

“Death is natural,” you said to me, in such a flat, matter-of-fact way, and then you laughed—a laugh so piercing that I felt my eardrums shred, I felt myself mocked. Yet I can see that a tree is natural, that the sea is natural, that the twitter of a twittering bird is natural to a twittering bird. I can see with my own eyes the tree; it stands with limbs spread wide

and laden with ripe fruit, its roots planted firmly in the rich soil, and that seems natural to me. I can see with my own eyes the sea, now with a neap tide, its surface smooth and calm; then in the next moment comes a breeze, soft, and small ripples turn into wavelets conquering wavelets, and that seems natural to me again. And the twittering bird twitters away, and that bears a special irritation, though not the irritation of the sting of the evening fly, and that special irritation is mostly ignored, and what could be more natural than that? But death bears no relation to the tree, the sea, the twittering bird. How much more like the earth spinning on its invisible axis death is, and so I might want to reach out with my hand and make the earth stand still, as if it were a bicycle standing on its handlebars upside down, the wheels spun in passing by a pair of idle hands, then stilled in passing by yet another pair of idle hands. Inevitable to life is death and not inevitable to death is life. Inevitable. How the word weighs on my tongue. I glean this: a worm winds its way between furrow and furrow in a garden, its miserable form shuddering, dreading the sharp open beak of any common bird winging its way overhead; the bird, then taking to the open air, spreads its wings in majestic flight, and how noble and triumphant is this bird in flight; but look now, there comes a boy on horseback, his body taut and eager, his hand holding

bow and arrow, his aim pointed and definite, and in this way is the bird made dead. The worm, the bird, the boy. And what of the boy? His ends are numberless. I glean again the death in life.

Is life, then, a violent burst of light, like flint struck sharply in the dark? If so, I must continually strive to exist between the day and the day. I see myself as I was as a child. How much I was loved and how much I loved. No small turn of my head, no wrinkle on my brow, no parting of my lips is lost to me. How much I loved myself and how much I was loved by my mother. My mother made up elaborate tales of the origins of ordinary food, just so that I would eat it. My mother sat on some stone steps, her voluminous skirt draped in folds and falling down between her parted legs, and I, playing some distance away, glanced over my shoulder and saw her face—a face that was to me of such wondrous beauty: the lips like a moon in its first and last quarter, a nose with a bony bridge and wide nostrils that flared out and trembled visibly in excitement, ears the lobes of which were large and soft and silk-like; and what pleasure it gave me to press them between my thumb and forefinger. How I worshipped this beauty, and in my childish heart I would always say to it, “Yes, yes, yes.” And, glancing over my shoulder, yet again I would silently send to her words of love and adora-

tion, and I would receive from her, in turn and in silence, words of love and adoration. Once, I stood on a platform with three dozen girls, arranged in rows of twelve, all wearing identical white linen dresses with corded sashes of green tied around the waist, all with faces the color of stones found lying on the beach of volcanic islands, singing with the utmost earnestness, in as nearly perfect a harmony as could be managed, minds blank of interpretation:

*In our deep vaulted cell
The charm we'll prepare
Too dreadful a practice
For this open air.*

Time and time again, I am filled up with all that I thought life might be—glorious moment upon glorious moment of contentment and joy and love running into each other and forming an extraordinary chain: a hymn sung in rounds. Oh, the fields in which I have walked and gazed and gazed at the small cuplike flowers, in wanton hues of red and gold and blue, swaying in the day breeze, and from which I had no trouble tearing myself away, since their end was unknown to me.



I walked to the mouth of the river, and it was then still in the old place near the lime-tree grove. The water was clear and still. I looked in, and at the

bottom of the river I could see a house, and it was a house of only one room, with an A-shaped roof. The house was made of rough, heavy planks of unpainted wood, and the roof was of galvanized iron and was painted red. The house had four windows on each of its four sides, and one door. Though the door and the windows were all open, I could not see anything inside and I had no desire to see what was inside. All around the house was a wide stretch of green—green grass freshly mowed a uniform length. The green, green grass of uniform length extended from the house for a distance I could not measure or know just from looking at it. Beyond the green, green grass were lots of pebbles, and they were a white-gray, as if they had been in water for many years and then placed in the sun to dry. They, too, were of a uniform size, and as they lay together they seemed to form a direct contrast to the grass. Then, at the line where the grass ended and the pebbles began, there were flowers: yellow and blue irises, red poppies, daffodils, marigolds. They grew as if wild, intertwined, as if no hand had ever offered guidance or restraint. There were no other living things in the water—no birds, no vertebrates or invertebrates, no fragile insects—and even though the water flowed in the natural way of a river, none of the things that I could see at the bottom moved. The grass, in little wisps, didn't bend slightly; the petals

of the flowers didn't tremble. Everything was so true, though—that is, true to itself—and I had no doubt that the things I saw were themselves and not resemblances or representatives. The grass was the grass, and it was the grass without qualification. The green of the grass was green, and I knew it to be so and not partially green, or a kind of green, but green, and the green from which all other greens might come. And it was so with everything else that lay so still at the bottom of the river. It all lay there not like a picture but like a true thing and a different kind of true thing: one that I had never known before. Then I noticed something new: it was the way everything lit up. It was as if the sun shone not from where I stood but from a place way beyond and beneath the ground of the grass and the pebbles. How strange the light was, how it filled up everything, and yet nothing cast a shadow. I looked and looked at what was before me in wonderment and curiosity. What should this mean to me? And what should I do on knowing its meaning? A woman now appeared at the one door. She wore no clothes. Her hair was long and so very black, and it stood out in a straight line away from her head, as if she had commanded it to be that way. I could not see her face. I could see her feet, and I saw that her insteps were high, as if she had been used to climbing high mountains. Her skin was the color of brown clay, and she

looked like a statue, liquid and gleaming, just before it is to be put in a kiln. She walked toward the place where the grass ended and the pebbles began. Perhaps it was a great distance, it took such a long time, and yet she never tired. When she got to the place where the green grass ended and the pebbles began, she stopped, then raised her right hand to her forehead, as if to guard her eyes against a far-off glare. She stood on tiptoe, her body swaying from side to side, and she looked at something that was far, far away from where she stood. I got down on my knees and I looked, too. It was a long time before I could see what it was that she saw.

I saw a world in which the sun and the moon shone at the same time. They appeared in a way I had never seen before: the sun was The Sun, a creation of Benevolence and Purpose and not a star among many stars, with a predictable cycle and a predictable end; the moon, too, was The Moon, and it was the creation of Beauty and Purpose and not a body subject to a theory of planetary evolution. The sun and the moon shone uniformly onto everything. Together, they made up the light, and the light fell on everything, and everything seemed transparent, as if the light went through each thing, so that nothing could be hidden. The light shone and shone and fell and fell, but there were no shadows. In this world, on this terrain, there was no day and there was no

night. And there were no seasons, and so no storms or cold from which to take shelter. And in this world were many things blessed with unquestionable truth and purpose and beauty. There were steep mountains, there were valleys, there were seas, there were plains of grass, there were deserts, there were rivers, there were forests, there were vertebrates and invertebrates, there were mammals, there were reptiles, there were creatures of the dry land and the water, and there were birds. And they lived in this world not yet divided, not yet examined, not yet numbered, and not yet dead. I looked at this world as it revealed itself to me—how new, how new—and I longed to go there.

I stood above the land and the sea and looked back up at myself as I stood on the bank of the mouth of the river. I saw that my face was round in shape, that my irises took up almost all the space in my eyes, and that my eyes were brown, with yellow-colored and black-colored flecks; that my mouth was large and closed; that my nose, too, was large and my nostrils broken circles; my arms were long, my hands large, the veins pushing up against my skin; my legs were long, and, judging from the shape of them, I was used to running long distances. I saw that my hair grew out long from my head and in a disorderly way, as if I were a strange tree, with many branches. I saw my skin, and it was red. It was the red of

flames when a fire is properly fed, the red of flames when a fire burns alone in a darkened place, and not the red of flames when a fire is burning in a cozy room. I saw myself clearly, as if I were looking through a pane of glass.

I stood above the land and the sea, and I felt that I was not myself as I had once known myself to be: I was not made up of flesh and blood and muscles and bones and tissue and cells and vital organs but was made up of my will, and over my will I had complete dominion. I entered the sea then. The sea was without color, and it was without anything that I had known before. It was still, having no currents. It was as warm as freshly spilled blood, and I moved through it as if I had always done so, as if it were a perfectly natural element to me. I moved through deep caverns, but they were without darkness and sudden shifts and turns. I stepped over great ridges and huge bulges of stones, I stooped down and touched the deepest bottom; I stretched myself out and covered end to end a vast crystal plane. Nothing lived here. No plant grew here, no huge sharp-toothed creature with an ancestral memory of hunter and prey searching furiously for food, no sudden shift of wind to disturb the water. How good this water was. How good that I should know no fear. I sat on the edge of a basin. I felt myself swing my feet back and forth in a carefree manner, as if I

were a child who had just spent the whole day head bent over sums but now sat in a garden filled with flowers in bloom colored vermillion and gold, the sounds of birds chirping, goats bleating, home from the pasture, the smell of vanilla from the kitchen, which should surely mean pudding with dinner, eyes darting here and there but resting on nothing in particular, a mind conscious of nothing—not happiness, not contentment, and not the memory of night, which soon would come.

I stood up on the edge of the basin and felt myself move. But what self? For I had no feet, or hands, or head, or heart. It was as if those things—my feet, my hands, my head, my heart—having once been there, were now stripped away, as if I had been dipped again and again, over and over, in a large vat filled with some precious elements and were now reduced to something I yet had no name for. I had no name for the thing I had become, so new was it to me, except that I did not exist in pain or pleasure, east or west or north or south, or up or down, or past or present or future, or real or not real. I stood as if I were a prism, many-sided and transparent, refracting and reflecting light as it reached me, light that never could be destroyed. And how beautiful I became. Yet this beauty was not in the way of an ancient city seen after many centuries in ruins, or a woman who has just brushed her hair, or a man who

searches for a treasure, or a child who cries immediately on being born, or an apple just picked standing alone on a gleaming white plate, or tiny beads of water left over from a sudden downpour of rain, perhaps—hanging delicately from the bare limbs of trees—or the sound the hummingbird makes with its wings as it propels itself through the earthly air.



Yet what was that light in which I stood? How singly then will the heart desire and pursue the small glowing thing resting in the distance, surrounded by darkness; how, then, if on conquering the distance the heart embraces the small glowing thing until heart and glowing thing are indistinguishable and in this way the darkness is made less? For now a door might suddenly be pushed open and the morning light might rush in, revealing to me creation and a force whose nature is implacable, unmindful of any of the individual needs of existence, and without knowledge of future or past. I might then come to believe in a being whose impartiality I cannot now or ever fully understand and accept. I ask, When shall I, too, be extinguished, so that I cannot be recognized even from my bones? I covet the rocks and the mountains their silence. And so, emerging from my pit, the one I sealed up securely, the one to which I have consigned all my deeds that I care not to reveal—emerging from this pit, I step into a room and I see

that the lamp is lit. In the light of the lamp, I see some books, I see a chair, I see a table, I see a pen; I see a bowl of ripe fruit, a bottle of milk, a flute made of wood, the clothes that I will wear. And as I see these things in the light of the lamp, all perishable and transient, how bound up I know I am to all that is human endeavor, to all that is past and to all that shall be, to all that shall be lost and leave no trace. I claim these things then—mine—and now feel myself grow solid and complete, my name filling up my mouth.