

THE VIADUCT

A novel

by

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I

The viaduct had been constructed by the Eastern Provincial Railway and ran from one green hill to another over eight great arches supported by slender brick piers. It was high; so high that under certain atmospheric conditions the railway it supported was unseen in the low cloud, the rising piers alone being visible. The city lay beneath the viaduct, and the viaduct dwarfed the city walls and gates, the cathedral with its tapering spires and even the parliament building with its green copper cupolas. Why permission had been given for the building of the railway was a mystery, unless in the last century the city had been so gripped by the vision of commercial and political wealth that it had allowed the Eastern Provincial Railway Company to erect the formidable structure which at all times of day cast its shadow over public and private buildings, churches and houses. Perhaps the citizens, at the conception of the railway, had been unaware of the scale of the viaduct which now transected their city.

The railway itself had never been a financial success and its structures and earthworks were now derelict.

The viaduct was completely redundant but it still dominated the city. The permanent way between its parapets had long since been taken over by nature; grasses and small trees had taken root and had, to some extent, made the viaduct a natural part of the landscape, as though it had been made not by man but by some natural erosive force in cutting out the valley.

A man stood on the viaduct. He was equipped for walking, for he wore boots, canvas trousers and jacket, and on his back he carried a pack. He stood silently, ignoring the wind, which, strong at this altitude, buffeted the fretted copings of the viaduct's parapets. He stood looking ahead of himself, his gaze fixed on the vanishing perspective of the overgrown railway line. He seemed to be unaware of the city below, though this was hardly possible, for the day was a Sunday, the time a quarter to eleven, and the foreshortened spires and towers of the city churches were banging their bells, one building competing with another until the sound that reached the thin air at the top of the viaduct had become a steady but confused metallic clangour. The only bell which stood alone, without compromise, by virtue of its profound sonority, felt rather than heard, was the deepest bourdon of the cathedral tower.

The man on the viaduct was oblivious to the sound, but stood, staring silently ahead of himself. Then, spurred on by an indefinable inner drive he began walking, taking his way amongst the trees and bushes.

Halfway along the viaduct he met a man walking a dog. The dog, a black labrador, little more than an active puppy, strained at its lead.

It was inevitable that the two men would meet. For a moment it seemed that they would pass each other without speaking. They looked at each other without recognition. For a moment it seemed that they did not share the same language. It was only when the man with the dog had passed that the other called to him.

'Tell me —'

The man with the dog turned, pulling at the dog's lead, commanding it to sit. The dog ignored his command. 'Sit, you beast.' He smiled at the lone man and gestured towards the dog. 'Only a few months old. They're critical in making a dog's character.'

The other man saw all this with his grave brown eyes. 'The last time I was in the terminus the railway was working; you could go anywhere. Today I went there and found it in ruins. When did the railway close?'

The man with the dog began to laugh. 'Where have you been? When indeed did it close! Ten

years, I suppose, twelve, perhaps. Look at those trees. Yet you say you aren't a stranger here.'

'I'm not a stranger; this is my city, I was born here. I have lived all my life here.'

'Are you making a fool of me? How can you have lived here and not known about all the changes?' The man with the dog might have thought that he was talking to a madman to judge by his expression. The man he was talking to saw this also. 'Where have you been all this time?'

The lone man sat on the edge of the parapet, oblivious to the terrifying drop on the other side. 'You can work out the answer to that for yourself, I suppose.'

And the man, so prompted, saw the close prison haircut, the thinness, the wariness of the eyes. The man with the dog was disinclined to meet those eyes, as though he himself were guilty of something. He bent down in the other man's shade and slipped the lead from the dog's collar. The dog, free, bounded away along the viaduct until he came to a clump of bushes.

'He can smell the rabbits; there are rabbits up here,' said the man who owned the dog.

The man who sat on the parapet said nothing. He stood, and looked down at the city beneath him, the plan of its streets open to him. 'That's strange,' he said. The sight of the remote city did not appear to disturb him; another man might have felt an uncontrollable vertigo, his grip freezing on the worn stone. 'It seems strange to think of nature here, above the city. And the trees, and this overgrown wilderness.' He turned to the other man. 'It is a constitutional walk of yours, this viaduct?'

'No, it isn't; I followed the dog. I've never been up here before. Solid, but I had half-forgotten its presence. Where you don't see change you take a thing for granted; you fret over little things. I live down there — ' He pointed to a field of grey slates and serrated roofs, row after row of terraced houses, not far from the spire of a church whose weathercock revolved endlessly in the perturbing eddies of wind which swept through the piers of the viaduct. 'I've never seen my home from any distance.'

'You have never been up here before, then?'

'Never. Except as a child, on the train. I took that for granted. This is more difficult. Then I went where I was sent; now I am closer to the day.' He joined the released prisoner and they both leaned on the coping of the parapet. 'It does not seem safe up here. I don't know how much maintenance is done.'

The freed man laughed, briefly and involuntarily. 'You are as safe up here as down there, I suppose. It would be all the same if the thing fell.'

'I don't mean that. It's the height of it, and the weight: look at the size of these stone blocks! And yet the city beneath is so small. Why, if you threw a stone from here you could hit the roof of any one of a dozen churches.' He paused. 'I never knew there were so many churches in the city. How small and enclosed the graveyards are.'

The freed man turned his back on the prospect and resumed his seat on the parapet. 'I daresay you could see the prison. I never saw its outside, and now I cannot bring myself to look. A few miles and it will be no more. But if I were to look, now, I could point out the very block, and the very window in that block. Fourth row up, look, and ninth along. The window faced the viaduct, here, and that was all that I could see. The way the sun caught the faces of the stone. I used to look out, up here, and I knew that the first thing I would do would be to travel along the viaduct, away from the city. I can't stay here. I am known too well.' There was irresolution in his voice. 'I'm not sure why you stand there listening to me.'

'It's nothing.' For want of looking at the freed man he followed the movements of the dog with his gaze.

'The viaduct was the only thing that I could see. When they let me out the first thing I did was to go to the terminus to leave the city. I can't stay here.' He felt in his pocket for a pipe, and brought out a small briar. It must have been brought recently, for the bowl was new and the mouthpiece unvarnished. 'I wonder if all families are as proud and as condemnatory. Me? They'd never speak to me now. I must get away and start again. I can't live here. A vast and echoing place that empty train-shed is.' He lit his pipe and coughed, looking down at the glowing bowl of the pipe. 'It will take me some

time to get used to it again. Smoking was not allowed.' He held the pipe lightly. 'It seems strange that the thing that takes our weight means nothing: those who built it had no idea where they were. I'll tell you what it meant to me: a place where the orders of the sky and earth were met.'

'So you are going nowhere in particular.'

'I'm leaving the city I never thought I'd wish to leave. I'm halfway there now.' He laughed, softly, as though at an interior thought. 'This is clearly the way.'

'But where are you going?'

The freed man shrugged his shoulders. 'Where am I going? Where we all go. All the plans lie in the past.' He was aware that the other man avoided his sight. Oh, you get used to that, he said to himself. 'I suppose you want to know why I was in there.'

'I never asked the question.'

'Oh, don't protest. You wanted to. It's natural.'

'It is nothing to me. I must go.' He smiled with a forced geniality. 'That dog of mine. No more than a pup.' He looked at the clump of bushes. 'Come out of there!'

'He's disobedient,' said the freed man, smiling.

'He had better not be.'

The freed man stood up. 'Where does this track go to?'

The dog's owner whistled, and the animal bounded out of the bushes, its tongue lolling. The animal's eyes were mischievous and bright. Its owner rattled the chain of the lead. 'Come here.' He glanced at the other man. 'What did you say?'

'Where does the track go?'

'I don't know, I'm no traveller, I've had no reason to take it, not since I was a child, and now I honestly forget the place we went, some generality of town, some generality of country, and we returned at night. Nothing of it stays in the mind. I don't know. In hindsight it seems like an illusion.' He chained the dog, and stopped talking.

'I shall find out for myself, then.' The freed man began to walk down the track. He did not look back at the owner of the dog and he did not look down at the city. Down below the noise of the bells had stopped, and the city was silent with a Sunday silence.

*

In the city beneath the viaduct the towers were silent. Midday had progressed through a hot afternoon to a dusty evening; the shadows stretched across the roofs of the churches and the law-courts and the houses, across the red pan-tiled roofs of the poor quarter, across the turreted roofs of the bishop's palace. In a few more hours these shadows would lengthen until they fled across the river-valley and the water-meadows. In half an hour's time the city bells would ring. Now the bells were silent.

A woman sat in a small quadrangle where the sun penetrated. This courtyard, measuring no more than twenty feet in any direction, was the private yard of the house in which she lived. It was overlooked by no windows other than her own, and these windows were open to allow the summer's evening air into the house. The woman sat on a bent-wood chair at a small table; neither of these pieces of furniture intended for use out of doors; maybe she had fetched them from the kitchen to take advantage of the summer air. The woman herself was tall and simply dressed. Her feet were bare. The table's top was empty in front of her. She stared at the wall opposite her chair, seeing the many shades in the bricks which must once have been part of other buildings; she saw the plants which grew in the mortared joints. Her face was without expression, cool and neutral, as though she knew and loved the private court.

Inside the house, through the open casements, furniture could be seen obscurely; the view gave the impression that the woman lived alone, was not given to entertaining, and had a sense of taste which might have been construed as being both practical and unaffected by fashion; perhaps she was

content to live in a house which had long ago been furnished by her parents, or her husband's parents. There was an impression also of order and security.

The two events happened at once. The shadow of one of the piers of the viaduct crept across the courtyard with a surprising rapidity, and the place grew cold. Coincidentally the doorbell rang.

The woman stood. She looked about her, surprised that anyone should call at this time. She smoothed her dress, and, still bare-footed she walked across her yard to the door, through the quiet kitchen, to the door in the further corner, the moving shadow of the viaduct behind her. The cool hallway lay in front of her. She saw the shapes of figures at the front door, silhouettes of men. She pulled the door open.

'Yes, I see that you know me,' said the man who stood on the step, 'I see that you recognised me on the instant that you opened the door. 'How could it have been otherwise?' He had been staring into the woman's face; now he dismissed her, flapping the palm of his right hand impatiently, indicating that she was to get out of his way. 'This is the house,' he said, turning back to the two men who stood behind him. Again he addressed the woman, 'Where is he?' He took a step into the house, and the woman retreated in front of him. 'It will save you time and agony if you tell us where he is hiding. Tell me which room, which attic, cupboard, corridor: tell me the direction or the road — but just tell me, briefly, quickly, nothing more than that.'

The woman retreated further into the hall. This is my house, she exclaimed to herself. 'What do you want?'

'The answer was in my question. Just tell me where he is.' The man with the blunt features spoke with a simulated anger.

He means me to see the falsity of his anger, thought the woman, to show me that he won't be deflected from his purpose. I shan't show him I'm defiant. 'I do not know.'

'I see. I'm supposed to believe that, am I? You don't forget that I saw you in the witness-box, giving out lie after lie on his behalf, to protect him.'

'But why should you want him? He was released only today.'

'I know that as well as you. We were looking out for him at the gate, missed him, didn't recognise him, one amongst many, seemed a generality of prisoner amongst released prisoners. As you know, original charges acquire fresh perspectives with the passing of time, and this escape will do him no good.'

'No escape; his sentence is served.'

'Changed, not served.' He lit a cigarette. Seeing that the woman did not answer he walked further into the house. 'When you work against the system which, no matter how obscure, prevails, you work against forgiveness and even its possibility. It pursues you while you live and forgets you when you are dead.'

He stood in the glazed passage which led to the quiet courtyard. 'This is your house?'

Why do I feel afraid when I think nothing of this man? 'What's that to you? Why are you here?' He's taking an inventory. The nervous anger in her voice made her words difficult to distinguish. Her heart pounded in her chest.

'We can talk about it in the yard out there.' The man walked out into the courtyard. The shadow of the viaduct's pier was more intense. 'Your anger is not false.'

My emotions are not false, she said to herself. There is something disturbingly familiar in what he does. The way he takes his papers from his briefcase and lays them out upon the table, making himself a desk. He sat down in the chair in a most natural manner, taking pens from his pocket, sharpening a pencil. He looked into his briefcase, rattling the instruments within it. He leaned on his elbows as though he had been accustomed to being in this courtyard for an hour on every fine evening of his life.

He faced the woman, 'are you cold?'

'No.'

'The place is in shadow.'

'Soon it'll pass.'

'I'm not so sure.' He paused, then rearranged the papers on the table, bringing out yet more items from his case: a dip-pen, a bottle of ink and blotting paper. He turned to one of the other men. 'Bring her a chair and a coat; it's cold. Then search the house. Close the door. Leave us alone.' He unbuttoned his jacket.

'You first encountered him when?' He paused, the pen ready to be dipped into the ink bottle.

'You know this; it's been told many times; you heard it all in court.'

'Keep calm. That was some time ago, and you know that what took place in the past cannot be trusted, of course you know that; in many ways it's hardly admissible as evidence, it's unfinished and remains to be completed in many different ways, innumerable, even; that's the way of it. So only the most liberal of interpreters would admit to the possibility of its being evidence, and then not likely, under emotional duress, perhaps.' He looked up at the viaduct, its stonework purple-black, the sun behind it, the streaming rays of its shadow falling obliquely through the heat-haze. 'You met him when he was a casual labourer, you had never set eyes on him before until he stood in the dust outside your house?'

'Yes.'

'And then you had sexual relations with him?'

The woman started to cry; the man watching her, his attitude one of practised patience, knowing to a second when she would stop her weeping and speak. She is afraid to think of me as her conscience, which in any case I am not. His, perhaps. They are the conscience of each other.

'That wasn't the reason for it at all,' she said, her words so indistinct that that man had difficulty catching them. He leaned forward over his desk, his fingers curled round its further edge. She said, 'You said that in a cruel way.'

'True, though. You had sexual relations with him. He was eighteen, a youth, and you were thirty. You didn't seem worried by the fact then; you couldn't have been worried by the fact that your neighbours must have known about it. And you were newly widowed.'

He stood up, his face red and angry, but there was a calculated spuriousness in that anger. 'Have you no shame?' he declaimed, like an actor, speaking loudly, his voice resonant. 'Have you no shame at all? Did you hold your husband's memory in so little regard that you went out and found the nearest labourer for your bed to satisfy you? If you were that kind of woman then, how can you now have changed?' He paused, looking down at his notes. 'Do you think that you can soften me with your crying? Although he frowned it was evident from his expression that he could just as well have smiled at the sight of the woman who stood in front of his desk.'

Only a few seconds later and they sat in silence, the man observant and watchful, the woman now shuddering with tears. Who will come to play the part of her conscience? thought the man. Around them the courtyard grew dark. Only the light from an upstairs window cast a stark square ray on the flagged floor.

The man stood up, heavily. He walked over to the woman and put an arm round her shoulder. 'Very well, then, perhaps you were deceived by him, who knows what took place in the past, every wall sees more than it can tell, and we know our minds no better. But you can tell me what you know. Talk to me; you know the truth; I want to hear it.' He bent down and touched her shoulder with his brow. 'How did it happen?'

'Why do you still want to know? You made an inquisition of his trial.'

'He brought it effortlessly on himself.' He paused. 'If I was brutal just now there was a reason for it. I have my duty to think of, that's clarity itself and has no history; and sedition is a terrible thing whatever its outcome. The very fact that you were taken in by him shows that for a fact. Do you think I have no understanding of how these things come about? I'm a married man with children and I live in a cramped house, one of many in a dusty street; I have no villa in the country. You are intelligent indeed, but, believe me, the intelligent are more gullible than the rest. How true that is.' He softened his voice.

'They were working out on the road, the three of them. It was a hot day.' She stopped speaking.

‘It was a hot day. It was a hot summer.’

The man, aware that his voice had been almost in mimic of hers, repeated the words in a soft solicitous undertone. ‘It was a hot day, yes, and they were working on the road, and you took them out some cider.’

‘No, not cider.’

‘Very well, it doesn’t matter what you took out to them.’

‘They were hot and thirsty, the three of them. Two of them were older and had grown into a life of labour – I remember the sight of their calloused hands as they took the glasses from me now; their backs were already beginning to be bent with work. I remember the way their eyes looked at me. They were kindly men.’

‘You invited the three of them here, into this yard of yours?’

‘Yes. It was hot on the road, and there’s no pavement, and the traffic rumbled past, raising a white dust.’

‘And the third of them? He was the youngest? He was this man, I suppose?’ The man took his hand from her shoulder. He drew in his breath. ‘You are not telling me very much, you know. You aren’t telling me why he so attracted you.’

‘He was very silent, very shy.’

‘That’s an obvious thing to say,’ said the man, with a ponderous attempt at humour. ‘Is it a truism to say that women always find the silent man attractive? What words do they imagine him speak?’

‘He was very silent, very shy, very much alone. The other two talked between themselves, their dialect hard to understand. He was not aloof for the sake of himself.’

‘I think I understand.’

‘And he was so young and there was something about him which reflected an inner train of thought. I watched him from the window. Where is he going? What has he been through? What has he seen of which I know nothing? What conclusion will he come to? Those were the questions which passed through my mind. He did not want speech. I invited him into my house, and he stood there, in the front room, looking at the furniture and the paintings. It was a hot day and he had no shirt. The fact embarrassed him, his being in my front room without a shirt.’

‘You thought he was suffering, and you took compassion on him?’

‘Yes.’ She stood up and took a step away from the table. Darkness was falling. ‘He was wounded. I never knew the extent of his wounds for some time. Even now I do not know how deep they were. Why he stood there and took them where others would have jumped aside I do not know.’

‘And you believed all that he said?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did it make sense?’

‘Yes. It always made sense. When people don’t set out to convince I’m drawn to believe them. Oh, you can be fooled for a day by anyone, but in sleep something comes to you, forewarns you — ’

‘You are a very gullible woman.’

‘I don’t mind believing others if that is to do the right thing.’

‘And finding you were gullible, he moved in with you, here, in your house, amongst your belongings, and made you his mistress?’

The woman was angry. ‘Get out of my house. Get out of it at once. Tell your men to go with you.’

The blunt featured man laughed softly. ‘So he never came back when he was released this morning?’

‘No, he has not come back.’ The woman had walked to the door. ‘I have to make no point to you, but he refused to see me when I went up there on visiting days.’

‘He cast you off, then?’

‘I have to make no point to you.’

‘Be truthful to yourself. You are a gullible woman. Always remember that.’

‘He was ashamed of what had been done to him, and proud of what he had done.’

‘Proud. A convict. The charges roll on, no end to them, changed by time but whatever form they take he is always answerable to them, that’s the way that things have been since Eden, beyond her gates they try to hide their shame within the set and structure of beliefs. And as for you, no-one forces you to feel ashamed.’

Above their heads a window catch rattled.

The man stared up at it. ‘The child is given an education and as a youth turns it against his elders. Tell me,’ he said, ‘before I go,’ and there was a soft satisfaction in his voice, ‘speaking of education, did he do his writing here?’

‘He wrote at my husband’s desk.’

‘I see. There’s no end to what you gave him, is there?’

‘I believed in him.’

‘You believed in him. Were you in my position you would find that every man who undermines the ground on which he stands has a fool who believes in him. Usually but not always a woman. Or else his thoughts and words are wind.’

The window was thrown open. A head peered down, hesitantly, as though waiting for instruction.

‘What is it?’ The blunt-faced man stared at the open window.

The voice of the man followed the question instantly. ‘A boxfile, in the attic bedroom, in the top of a mahogany wardrobe, a cavity covered by plywood.’

The blunt-featured man turned to the woman. ‘I take it that you knew it was there?’

‘Yes, I did.’

He called up to the window. ‘And inside?’

‘Typed pages. Carbon copies.’

‘What else would one expect.’ Softly he said to the woman, ‘You’ll be telling me next that you typed them for him.’

He brushed past the woman, saying nothing further to her. He walked into the front room, observing the narrow window, still shuttered as it had been in the heat of the day, the sideboard, the bookcase, the writing-desk. He saw the covered typewriter in a corner of the room. ‘One of you must carry that. We’ll need to match the type.’ He looked up the stairs. ‘Bring down that boxfile.’

He took the box in his hands and opened it. ‘So unimportant,’ he said, ‘and its sense so fleeting.’ He looked at the mass of paper. As he did this he looked at the woman who stood in the doorway leading to the kitchen; for a moment it seemed that he was about to speak to her, for he opened his mouth. Perhaps his last sentences had been directed towards her.

When he and his two men left the house the street was silent. Within a few minutes the bells of the city churches and the great bells of the cathedral tower began to ring.

II

Where *A* is going, *B*, *C* and the rest will follow. Even before *A* had reached the end of the viaduct that spanned the city he was aware of his pursuers.

He began to run, in the manner of a pursued man, although he was uncertain as to whether the figures behind him were pursuing him. He reached the end of the viaduct, where the railway ran for a little way on level ground before plunging into a deep cutting. He ran on, in the shadow of the cutting. The undergrowth hampered his running, and before he had gone far into the cutting he was forced to unstrap the pack from his shoulders. For a few seconds he held his pack in his hands, and then he tossed it into a clump of bushes that grew over the ditch beside the railway. Without bringing the thought to mind he knew the worthlessness of the things which were within it.

He ran light now.

He ran light, but he had nothing other than the clothes he wore and the few things in his pockets. He looked round and saw his pursuers, if, indeed, they were pursuing him. They seemed to be making no better progress than he; if anything he had run faster than they, and they were no more than small figures, intermittently seen between the spindly trees, following their own path through the briars as though determined not to follow in *A*'s footsteps lest they fall into his ways, for *A*, quite naturally, had taken the most natural and easy way as it had opened itself to him.

Had he imagined the pursuit? Were the three men in chase of him? Or were they looking beyond him? Why did they not follow the clearer way that he had taken? He looked back and saw them beating down the briars.

He was light and they were heavily accoutred with uniforms. Once he saw the reflection of metallic light from one of the figures; perhaps the shining of a polished buckle. He saw no sign that they were armed, other than with the staves with which they beat their way through the undergrowth.

Realizing his advantage he stopped to catch his breath. He looked around himself at the dense undergrowth in the cutting. The light was dim and gloomy in this canyon and the sky was a strip of light. The sheer masonry of the sides was lichen and moist and there was the sound of trickling water. Overhead, at the lip of the cutting, willow herb grew in profusion and its seeds were borne into the still air of the cutting by the light wind. He looked ahead and saw the growing density of the spindly trees and the upward-striving bushes. He must go on. The sides of the cutting were of solid rock, far too steep to climb. There was no alternative but to go on. He plunged into the undergrowth; almost immediately he cut his right hand on something sharp. He looked at his cut hand and saw his own blood, dark red, almost black in the attenuated green light that filtered down through the foliage of the saplings.

He had torn the skin of his hand on a single strand of barbed wire that, covered by convolvulus, had been unnoticed. He now saw that a wire stretched slackly across the track, stapled to a few leaning posts.

He climbed the wire – looking down at it he saw that the barbs on it were long and frequent, as though the wire had been made for military and not agricultural use – and fled further into the forest of etiolated trees.

He stood in silence. Here, in this dank cutting, there was a sense of decay, for all the youthfulness of the thin trees that overarched him. He looked back. The three figures were closer than he had thought. One of them pointed to him. In the sunshine of the distance three horsemen were riding to join them. The cutting collected and amplified the sound of the hoofbeats and he heard them even before he saw the animals and their riders. He knew then the certainty of pursuit, and began to run, awkwardly, his footing uncertain on the rusting rails and the rotten and slippery sleepers. Within a few yards he came to a choked stream which overflowed the cistern that had once held it; the sound of the water was louder than the sound of the pursuit. He cupped his hands and drank the cool water, the air about him filled with the sound of the water and the buzz of insects. Perhaps the horsemen were nothing to do with him. Ahead, part of the cutting had caved in, and dressed stones lay ankle-deep in moss.

The same thick moss covered the tall and spindly poles which were the trunks of the trees. The way ahead was, to his impenetrable mind, impassable. He began to climb the heap of fallen stones and rubble. From an elevation of only a dozen feet he was able to look back and see the scale of the pursuit; not only the men on foot, but also the horsemen, and further animals, pack-horses, carrying provisions, cooking stoves and tents, and groups of men, military smiths, farriers and civilian tradesmen. Surely all this has nothing to do with me, he said, what they plan is no less than a lifetime's journey.

He did not see the man who stood on the top of the bank of fallen rubble until this man called to him.

'You are beyond the city's boundary. They will come no further. I don't think they can even see you any more.'

A looked at the man, distinguishing him with difficulty, for he was dressed in a suit of green corduroy that merged in with the dense greenness of the moss and the lichen. He was a tall man, thin, and his arms were spread out, empty palms uppermost, an expression perhaps intended to express an absence of a weapon and the presence of good intention. 'Didn't you hear me? What language do you speak?'

A was too exhausted to answer. He stood, panting like a dog, sweat shining in his face.

'You're all but done in,' said the man in the torn corduroy suit. He did not move, though; he put his hands into his pockets. 'You can run on, if you like, but there'll be no advantage in it. They won't go past the boundary; if you are a yard beyond their sight they will have forgotten you.'

'What boundary?' A gasped the words almost voicelessly, but the standing man must have heard him.

'You saw the wire, didn't you?'

'I cut myself on it.' A held up his wounded hand. 'It has long spikes.'

The standing man cocked his head on one side and smiled. For the first time he moved, stepping with an easy caution down the terrace of fallen stones until he stood a few paces from A. 'You are all but done. Your heart must be beating like a drum.'

'I can still hear the horses! I can still hear them!'

'No longer. Not here.' The man in the green suit shrugged his shoulders. 'You might as well believe me. It won't do you much good if you don't.'

'I can still hear them!'

The tall man stared at him incredulously. 'It is your own heartbeat that you hear: Come back. Come back and look.'

A, despite himself, turned and looked back. He saw the smile on the tall man's face; he looked beyond.

The horsemen had stopped at the centre of the track in the vicinity of the barbed wire. One of them had dismounted, and was now tying a piece of red cloth to the wire, so it might be better seen. The sunlight glittered briefly on his peaked cap. The blue uniform and the braiding were very distinct.

The tall man had joined A, his strides long and lanky, his arms swinging by his sides. 'I told you they would stop.'

'What will they do now?'

'They'll stay here for a while. I've seen it before. They do little except talk: but if you were to cross that boundary again their recall would be immediate and total. It seems they cannot come further.'

'What is to stop them?'

'They are at the limit of what is known to them.'

'And yet we are beyond it.'

'So it seems. How close the boundary is, in places, one step, even —'

The two mounted horsemen had by now seen A. One of them pointed. The man's face was clearly distinguishable by a black moustache.

'I recognize that man,' said A.

'I doubt it,' said the other, 'on this side they all look much the same.'

'No, I recognize him.'

'I suppose he is a friend of yours?'

A looked sharply at the tall man, who did nothing more than raise his eyebrows.

'You say you cut yourself on the boundary wire.'

'Yes, but not deeply.'

'If it drew blood, then that's a good sign; that's what they say, no more than a superstition and there are many superstitions about the boundary wire, you become aware of them, and then you know that it is close; they differ according to which side you are; it's said that the boundary would be known had the wire itself not been there; perhaps the boundary itself is nothing but a superstition, that's been said; there are some who say that the way in which we go is made by countless intersections, boundaries unknown: so we are always on the boundary, are the boundary. They say that the horsemen have their own superstitions too, perhaps the strongest of them is that they cannot cross the boundary.'

'How long will they stay there?'

'That depends on what other matter might call them. And, also, what they remember of you, whether that is truthful or not, it fades fast, soon they will not be able to put a name to the face, or tell a man apart from a generality of men; then they look for evidence of upbringing: origin and place. Character so soon goes, passes like a cloud, that's a local superstition, 'make one person from these piles of bones' as it said above an ossuary door in which I passed a winter's night. A cold night. What's your name?'

'I am known by my initial.'

'Which is?'

'A.'

'Very well, Italic A, that's a reasonable name. B and C and the rest are in the offing and will soon follow your path, then?'

'I'll extend my name to *Ariel*,' said A.

'Why not?' said the thin man: 'one can spend days tailoring a name.'

'I can't think of B and C, never thought of them,' said *Ariel*, what does he mean? he asked himself, is there a succession of us?'

The thin man smiled slowly. *Ariel* saw for the first time that his eyes were coloured more deeply round the edges of his irises than round the pupils: this unusual colouring gave a curiously fixed concentration to his gaze. 'I suppose you could say that I have helped you.' Not waiting for a reply he went on, 'and that might at least (for the time being) give me the right to ask you why thought yourself pursued.'

'If that is what you wish' said *Ariel*. 'I had always thought: to know pursuit for what it is, you must look back. Is that superstition, as you would say? I looked forward; *I am pursued, and how close my pursuers are*. I looked back; *no, I am not pursued, the track is empty, to the end* —

'I was let out of prison at dawn today.'

'You were let out of prison today and they already want you again?'

'They were waiting for me at the very gate but mistook my identity amongst the rest. Early dawn, the light was bad, the narrow street was half in shadow, there was a slight mist, the identities of the others obstructed them, they couldn't tell one from another.'

'What had you done that you were wanted again?'

'It was explained to me like this: one does not know the meaning of one's deeds until the end of life.'

'So, what have you done that you are still guilty?'

'Not much more than any other man; I thought my thoughts through and I spoke them and I wrote them down as best I could in the only language which I have. They told me: living people don't write serious things. I printed it and bound it myself, and sold one copy, which the prosecution bought.'

The horsemen had all dismounted, and had taken off their heavy helmets.

The tall man saw *Ariel's* faintness. 'Let us get away from here. You have had enough of it. Besides, the horsemen, though they cannot cross the boundary, have a habit of staring. It's another of the local superstitions that their stare can make you faint, and can age you, years in a day. It's not to be believed; no superstition is, but all the same they look at you as though they were wondering who you were and trying to piece together your identity. In time this makes you wonder who you are, and it's that which makes you feel faint. But the stare itself: that is a fact.'

*

The deep and steadily inclined cutting led to a tunnel. That should have been obvious.

The tunnel's mouth, gaping its damp exhalation in the form of a visible mist, had been built by the EPR with a classical entablature and pediment; the portal had the proportions of a door, the keystone hanging far above any locomotive or wagon that might once have passed beneath it. It was all the more impressive in decay.

What were the ambitions of the Company which had built it? No mortal other than the locomotive-driver or the permanent-wayman could have seen its front elevation. No passenger, travelling at speed, would have seen its classical proportions in clouds of steam beyond the carriage window.

It was towards this tunnel that the two men walked. The pursued man's mind was still uneasy with the thought of the pursuit, and with the thought of the fixed stare of the horseman who stood behind the wire from which a red flag hung unmoving. It was clear that the way back was closed.

*

The two men had made their camp within the mouth of the tunnel in the crescent of half-light. The floor was dry but the steady air that blew out to the tunnel had the feel of dampness in it. The tall man who wore the corduroy suit stood at the mouth of the tunnel, looking down towards the cutting; he could make out (with some difficulty) the horsemen at the boundary, but his gaze was directed beyond these figures, at the curve of the distant viaduct, across which the late sunlight fell. The other man was as thin as he, but his leanness was less exaggerated because he was short; his head was large and his neck muscular. He wore a white shirt with a ribbed front, and collarless, a dress shirt, and over this a leather coat no longer than the usual pattern but coming down to his calves. He was carrying a bundle.

'What have you brought with you this time?' asked the tall man, 'You collect rubbish and then it's me that has to decide what to do with it.'

'Oh, I want proportion, proportion is what I want,' said the short man, laying the bundle down, 'I saved you the job of going back to find it, that's what I have done, I was there where you threw it, an excellent pass.' He said this to *Ariel*, who was sitting in the shadow by the tunnel wall, his back against a piece of oil-cloth. 'I saw it all, from the edge of the cutting, nothing was lost on me. I could read his mind, are they after me or are they not? How the stance varies with the answer that he gave himself. I kept pace with him, on the top, in the sun. Truthfully you'd hardly know there was a cutting there, and then I slid down a gully in the brickwork that was made for me, halved the life of this shirt, and caught what he threw.'

'Why have you brought it? What made you think I wanted it?'

'Was I mistaken?' His face had an innate good nature. 'Could it be otherwise? It's heavy. And its shape, well, its shape could be anything. No noise when I caught it.' He winked at *Ariel*. 'You must have had time to find it, from where you had hidden it, beforehand? Is that the truth?'

The tall man looked down at him. 'Nothing of any worth at all, he threw it away, as we all do, one thing after another, with some certain things go first, with others, something different. That's

proportion, as you say. And as for you,' he said, turning to *Ariel*, 'how is that food coming on? Is it ready to eat?'

'I am not particular.'

'He is our new cook,' said the tall man.

'Look at this,' said the small man, who had undone the package, 'All manner of things one shouldn't throw away— identity card, money, not much, enough for a day or so without beer, testimonials, several of them, here, "*Italic A works hard and I commend him to you.*" And, again, "this man deserves a chance." Here, also, "Let him work a day for you and you'll never let him leave your sight." A good one, that; I wish I could get a similar; more — ' He looked at *Ariel*. 'You can only afford to look stupid when your mind's as keen as a knife, that's my motto, so I'll ask, did you mean to throw this away, or did you mean to go back for it, and if you meant to throw it away can I have what you have no wish for?'

'Take what you want,' said *Ariel*.

'The testimonials, if I could borrow those, taking for a moment your name as well, perhaps you wouldn't mind.'

'I don't mind.'

'That food smells as if it could be eaten! The pot's steaming away. Truly, the wind in this place is perverse. At least you might keep the enamel plate and the knife.' He was looking deeper into the package. 'What is all this paper?'

The tall man looked down at him, 'You are curious about everything, you are. But you wouldn't read it.'

'I don't suppose that I would be able to. Give me a kind of sense of what it says, using words which I would understand.'

'He's the one to do that.'

'It's no longer important,' said *Ariel*. 'I thought it was, but, now, the thing that drove the understanding and the writing of it has gone, and all that was left was to put it down.'

The short man wrinkled up his face. 'So you wrote all this and then threw it, with disgust, that was your expression, *I've had enough*, threw it wherever it would land.'

'That's close enough to the truth.'

'You'll need the plate at least.' He turned it over in his hands. 'It's badly made. The enamel's cracked and coming off already and the thing itself unused and still in its greaseproof.' He took out one piece of paper after another, 'Is there anything worth reading? Sometimes I wish I could read, and sometimes I think, no, there is enough disproportion in the world, it might change me into something that I would never know and wouldn't know how to speak to. Nor want to know. So.'

'The dark is setting in,' said *Ariel*.

'Doesn't it always,' said the small man, 'and then if you can read or not, it is all the same. You don't like to talk about it?'

'No. Anything else, yes, but I've never known such change in so short a time. Something has gone and something else is in its place.'

'You are talking like me now,' said the short man, looking out at the moving lamps near the boundary, a line of them, the shadows flickering amongst them. He looked up at the tall man. 'What takes your gaze?'

'Oh, nothing here. We had better light our lamp. How much paraffin remains?'

'It's nearly full.'

The little man lit the lamp and poured out stew into the three plates; on the instant of his finishing this action he plunged his spoon into his share. 'Hot!' he said, 'hot on a cold night,' exhaling through his open mouth, the steady stream of cold air blowing the vapour from his mouth and food into the open air. 'It's raining.'

'I hear nothing,' said *Ariel*.

'I hear it before it falls. Always I hear it.'

They looked out together to see the lamplight in the cutting; some sort of shelter had been erected; they could see the wet planes of dark canvas.

'I see it all,' said the short man, 'He doesn't yet know what to say, thinks of something, seems not right, doesn't put it into words, changes it, lets it go. I know it. I was in there. If you learn to read and write, you do so in the way they want you to. I know it too well. When you go in there, the thing that you are taught – the first thing you are taught – is that there is no such thing as a question, not from you, not from them, not from some third party who wears a blindfold. Imagine it. It's like having a young dog, and slapping it round the head, just because it does something that you make up on the spur of the moment to be something you disliked. So it's the butt to what you feel like. Inconstant master, dog doesn't know when it's in the right or in the wrong, puts its ears down, fawns, maybe that's wrong, too. If it could speak it would choose its words with such care they'd mean nothing. You might ask, 'is it raining outside?' A question: a cause which brings about the one result. So you don't speak. Of course, if you're not powerless, things might be different. After a while, travelling along the track, you think, maybe I got it wrong, what I am I do not know, but I see the world in a way which no-one else has seen it, and, hey, that's unique.'

The tall man looked from one to the other in the hissing lamplight. 'Sometimes all I hear are comments on the world.' He took the nub of a cigarette from his pocket.

'I certainly feel lost at the moment,' said *Ariel*.

'You are exaggerating,' said the tall man, in a flat voice.

'No, I'm not exaggerating.'

'There's nothing more to eat, is there?'

'A little for tomorrow,' said the short man, 'then we've nothing but our eyes and wits.'

A silence fell.

'Do you trust us?'

Ariel looked at the tall man, who had broken the silence with this question.

'I don't trust myself.'

'That's the truth.' He looked at the short man. 'Do I trust you?'

'More often than not. We rely, I think, rather than trust.'

'Do I rely on you, then?'

'Oh, yes,' said the short man, holding up his hands, 'You need someone to keep you on the earth.' He nodded in the direction of the package. 'Punctuation is the thing I'm good at.'

'Were you born in the city?' asked the tall man.

'Yes,' said *Ariel*.

'And spent most of your life in it?'

'My childhood,' said *Ariel*.

'I've never been down to the city myself, always wanted go down there, always felt nervous when it came to it, that's the truth, I know it from what I've made of it from the viaduct, which is nothing like it is when you're in its streets, I'd say.' He stood against the tunnel's mouth, visible only in outline. 'Right?'

The shorter man stood up. 'Yes?'

'There are three of us now,' said the tall man, 'and we should be on our way tomorrow. You and me have spent too long here; we'll soon be rooted.' He walked over to *Ariel*. 'You'd do well to travel with us,' he said, 'and if you decide you don't like our company, well, enough of them, you can say, you can take what's yours and go, leave, without thanks, in the night, that's how it's done, that's the custom, doesn't burden the emotions. But stay for a while until you find out what the life is like, learn something of the many languages, the customs: it's like the world itself up here, and there's not one thing which is written down, all becomes reduced or enhanced in memory, that's all there is, that and days and seasons. There are three of us now.'

'Why do you say that again?' *Ariel* lay on the straw, resting on his side.

The tall man looked at him. 'Three for safety,' he said, 'One of the oldest sayings. "One to seek,

one to find and one to obliterate.” If we press on tomorrow, then we’ll need safety.’ He jerked a thumb towards the impenetrable darkness of the tunnel. ‘You’ve not been beyond?’

‘No. When I was a child I rode the train, but that was in a different time.’

‘It’s dark, now, but there’s a moon, and when you look out, through the frame of the tunnel’s mouth, the darkness is nothing to that at the back of the eye. How long a tunnel is it? You can’t see the end, and there is no curve. Beyond it, all I have is what I’ve heard said, and the truth of it’s unknown. People who’ve been there look as if they’ve seen something, but they aren’t well fed, and they don’t stop long with you.’ His face, in outline against the sky, might have been the face of a distinguished man. “‘Where are they going?’” That’s the question which you ask yourself; you can’t help it, the question comes to mind without the need for words, and then you see yourself amongst them, and the question is “‘where am I going?’” and one is drawn along from one day to the next, suns rise and the land is strange, you don’t bother your head about the others, and what they carry, and the attitudes of effort as they put down what is theirs and straighten their backs and look ahead. Sometimes they show friendliness, one takes to it, the kindly act, the immediate response, the eyes meet. It’s easy to travel for days and miles with someone you do not know, saying I do not know him, never ask his origin, he wouldn’t know the answer, you speak to one another in the languages of code, he would never ask you your beginnings – what would you say? There’s no word for it and there’s nothing more. You take them as they appear in the distance, as they do you.’

The tall man and the short man looked at each other, then the short man lowered his heavy head and looked down at his hands; he began to pull a piece of straw between his fingers.

‘You gave me advice when you saw that I was pursued.’

‘Was it you who was pursued and no-one else? They were after someone who looked like you, perhaps, but the boundary is past and you can say what you like: that’s that: they wouldn’t know you if they saw you. But if you were to walk back down those streets their recall would be total: much greater than your memory. I warned you then, and here’s a warning, too; you can’t go back; you’ll be pulled or cut to fit the limits of a world you do not know.

‘And now you ask why I helped you! There’s nothing else that can be done, don’t you see that? You are drawn forwards, upwards to your feet by what you hear and what you see, he’s in danger, you go towards him, calm manner feigned, diffidence comes natural to the manner in the end when you see another struggle.

‘And the little man is right; you can’t ask a question and get an answer which you know is right. Who knows whether you would hear the truth? How the boundary between the untrue and the true divides. And you hear all the old tales, the impossible adventures, the hardships, the losses. What can be done? The dead are the dead and the world of the living alters by the day. It’s difficult to meet someone who you wouldn’t call a beggar.’ He pointed to the shorter man, ‘and he’s as capable a beggar as I have ever met —’

‘If you say so.’

‘I do say so.’

‘And he’s an accomplished thief.’

‘If you say so,’ said the short man, his words curiously inflected, like a man attempting to say something in a foreign language for the first time.

‘And a successful one, at his best when he’s talked himself into believing that he’s not a thief.’

‘Desperate men aren’t thieves.’

‘Is that so?’

‘It is.’

‘Where’s the bottle?’

‘None left. You had it all last night.’

‘Where is it?’

‘Gone.’

‘Do you think I remember nothing? The level was at the top of the label.’

The small man put a hand in the deep pocket of his leather coat and drew out a spirit bottle, passing it to the tall man.

'The level's gone down since I left you with it.' He uncorked the bottle. 'I suppose you were thirsty on top of the cutting.'

'Yes, I was thirsty up there.'

The tall man shrugged his shoulders; the comment did not interest him. Instead he looked down at the open bottle. He lifted it to his lips and swallowed twice. He sighed. His drinking had been silent. He put the cork back in the neck. 'When we wake we leave.'

Ariel, who had watched the passing of the bottle, now followed the tall man's stare. 'How do you know where I'm going?'

'Where else is there for you?'

Put so simply the statement struck *Ariel* dumb.

The tall man lay back at his ease. 'Oh, once in while you see a loner but usually he is a wordless soul, a simple soul.'

'It's ahead that fills the imagination; you've heard so much from others and all that you hear seems to bear out what you heard elsewhere and in the past: all words point one way and seem to have agreement at the core: for a start, say, there's a wide and fertile plain, going on, day after day, say, the railway straight, the track so straight that you can see the end on the horizon a lifetime before you meet it: say, through woods and through towns, and then a range of hills, so faint that you might mistake them for clouds, where they end and where the clouds begin you can't start to ask. And the track as straight . . . as straight as . . .' He did not finish the sentence. 'You can't give free reign to what you listen to. Talk's too easy. Stay the night here, and travel through the tunnel with us. Tomorrow you can be your own agent.'

'Where in the end are you going?'

The tall man paused. 'You'll see the range of hills when we go through the tunnel, even from the darkness.'

Ariel was about to ask another question. He leaned forward. He opened his mouth to speak, but the tall man grasped his right shoulder: his grip slid down to his upper arm. 'Let me go,' said *Ariel*, resenting the touch of the man's hand.

'You want to understand something.' The tall man spoke rapidly and softly. 'You are new here, your experiences are of a place elsewhere. There, you know yourself: here, you don't. The seasoning of travel! The weight of the days! O, all that will fall on you, it comes to everyone, it comes to the tiniest child up here —'

'What should I understand?'

'You should understand what lay behind the question you were on the edge of asking!'

'What of it?'

'Don't think of it! It'll lose you everything: put it in words, even to yourself, and that'll be the end of you!'

'Once there was,' said the short man, 'the director of a large consortium of hospitals. He was a strange one, that. His head was full of figures, and in the evenings he would pass the hours for us all by feats of mental arithmetic. We would shout out numbers – five figure numbers – and he would divide and multiply them in his head. He would hide his head in his rags and shout out the answers in a rather muffled way. He hid his head; he knew that when he spoke he spat.'

'What was he doing in rags?' *Ariel* looked into the darkness where the profile of the tall man was distinct.

'What was he doing in rags? What sort of question is that? He was sitting on a hard stone with a miserable cold back huddled over a fire that scorched his hands. That's what he was doing, in rags.'

'Once he borrowed a good suit and left the railway, applied for a job as a manager in a fruit-growers estate. Got it easily. A lot of figures involved. He said he was there for over three years before they found out that he was a traveller on the railway. And that was the end. He was back up here

again.'

'How did they find out about his past?'

'These questions!' said the tall man. 'As a dirigiste manager he dictated the way that fruit must grow. Of course it didn't do as he asked. He was a failure. Can't you take what you hear on its own evidence? Don't you know yet the things that are ineradicably stamped on the face of a traveller? The sign that is in every aspect of a gesture? Every word and mannerism?'

'Tomorrow we shall go.'

'What an echo this place has,' said the short man, his voice solemn.

III

They stood at the further mouth of the tunnel, looking outwards in the dawn upon a land they had never seen before. They had not spoken a word since their wakening, and all three of them knew that they would not speak in the face of the eastern light.

The railway ran high above the plain: the tunnel emerged, as though blind, halfway up a hill. The track crossed a deep river valley by means of a cantilever bridge, the metalwork of which soared far above them in the pale sunlight. The dew dripped and streamed from its girders. The track continued, as straight as an arrow, broaching the plain, riding on a high embankment.

‘They said the way was straight,’ said the tall man, as though witnessing a revelation, ‘all who have seen it say this: the way is straight.’

Distances are deceptive in the early light. The air was so transparent that the far mountains, remote and rounded, set the skyline with their diffuse clarity. The moulded shadows, shaped and curved, flowed down the hills and into the darker valleys of the range.

Closer, beneath the face of the traveller, as it were, the floor of the plain was divided into rich fields by thick hedges in which tall elms grew. The noises of the farms were clear in the morning air, mingling with the calls of the wild birds. There was the beginning of human activity also: the banging of a far door of a cottage, the creak of an unseen gate’s hinge, the clank of machinery.

‘You seem to take in all that’s there,’ said the short man, ‘as if there were nothing that you could not see or hear.’

The tall man looked down.

Ariel, watching him, saw that he was looking down at the plain as though feeling a kind of sorrow. Then he saw that he looked beyond the plain.

‘Are you looking at the hills?’

‘I am. That’s my home.’

‘Did you leave it long ago?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘You look sorrowful.’

‘Oh, that is nothing. Some days there is nothing that has no shady side.’ He shifted from one foot to another. ‘It comes to the same thing in the end. Anything that stands in sunlight throws a shadow.’

The small man, who had turned his face fully to each of the others as he had spoken, now nodded his head vigorously. ‘You don’t want to worry about him, he has these moods, they come and go like landscapes: sometimes you’d think him a different person. Yesterday — ’ He shrugged his shoulders as though they would explain all. He looked at the tall man as though he had become inanimate. ‘Yesterday he was high, but you could tell that he was on the edge, and about to fall. You see a kind of giddiness. Feel it in yourself. A flowing of the air. I could tell that we would be in for a few days of bad country. I can tell these things: anyone can, after seeing them once. Sometimes he is the last person to see out what is in store, just goes on, sinks to his knees, and I wonder, are we all like that, something in us displaced on the land we travel through. At these times I can speak about him as though he were not here.’

The tall man smiled. He drew a long breath and his smile vanished, though its expression was left on his face. ‘He’s right, there’s not much insight in me, sight’s stooped down, only the grey and fast-repeated days where there is nothing which is not ill-seen; and what I hear I have heard before. He can speak about me as though I were not here. One makes one’s way through days.’ He began to walk forward. He looked down at the track, at an imaginary point about ten or twelve feet beyond him. For the moment and for him the plains and the mountains beyond had no existence. All he saw was the track, and that for him might have been endless.

They watched him walk on, standing silently themselves. *Ariel* turned to the shorter man. ‘He was saying last night that a certain expression marks the traveller apart; and from this mark he cannot

escape.’ He looked down the track. ‘Was he speaking of himself?’

“‘Don’t you know yet the things that are ineradicably stamped on the face of a traveller? The sign which is in every aspect of a gesture?’” As he spoke these words the small man’s voice was a faithful copy of the voice of the man who had first uttered them. Yet there was no tone of mimicry in the sharp emotion.

Ariel looked at the small man. ‘Do you remember everything he says?’

‘Mostly I remember it.’ The small man, perhaps wondering if he had trusted *Ariel* too much, said, ‘It doesn’t matter much.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘I have an ear for remembering chains of words, and often I go over them in my mind, wondering what it is they mean. Wondering what it is they bind, or perhaps efface. “Ineradicably”; that’s a word that leads within a chain of words. Do you remember it?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘I’m a common man. I wouldn’t use a word like that, because I’d sound stupid. If I’d remained in the street where I was a boy and had used a word like that I’d soon be in a fight: without a doubt. But now I travel with him I find the words I do not understand coming out of my mouth. I hear them, and, I think, no-one understands them. No, they don’t. That’s not what they’re about.’ He jerked his head in the direction of the thin walking figure. ‘Then I forget them, these phrases, but they come out again when I talk. And since then I’ve always listened to what is said behind the words —’

‘You speak well,’ said *Ariel*.

The small man’s face shone with an immediate pleasure, as though no greater compliment could have been given.

Ariel started to walk, the small man beside him, looking up into his face and trying ineffectually to hide a grin of pleasure. He shook his head. ‘I can’t believe you,’ he said at length, ‘I don’t think that you were honest when you said that.’

‘I was honest. Why should I not have been? What might I want from you?’

‘That’s true enough.’

They began to walk faster. The tall man was by now so far away that he was only a dark line, not immediately recognisable as being human. Had he suddenly started to walk faster?

‘Faster,’ said the small man, ‘He’ll be running soon.’

As they quickened their pace the small man began to talk, ‘Oh, I can only talk when I’m doing something else, and when my mind’s not in it, that’s a fact, I stand still and my tongue is tied, many contrary things go through the mind, like lightning, many of them, some are slow, like drayman’s horses, they just are, take the streets they always know as though they had no driver, hills and corners, familiar as one’s hand, won’t be put in words —’ His voice had a sudden and stilted quality to it, as though he knew that his words were under scrutiny, perhaps by himself as much as by *Ariel*. ‘When I was on my own, with no-one, the streets that were my home looked back upon without much in the way of hope, I was what they call a simple soul, forgot the use of words, dumbpresent to the day, saying nothing to another, avoid them, look aside. Shy? I used to do my travelling at night. Not at the time I wanted anything further. I’d pass by the camps the other travellers had made, and they’d be asleep, innocent, by the light of the glowing fires and by the moon. The peace of a child’s sleep even in the faces of the old. The young men and women who by day would know it all – they had shed the little that they knew and would sleep within the innocence that knows no time.’

‘Are these your words?’

‘Who knows? Not me. Words I got from him, perhaps that’s where I came on them, but what I want to say is all my own.’

‘I was travelling alone. And, in the moonlight, I would sit at the travellers’ fires while they slept, and I would believe that I was with them, in their party, travelling with them. Sometimes I would feel strongly that this was so. I would know that I was one of them. Sometimes when the night turned cold I’d fetch wood and silently make up the fires. “Who is that?” might be the sleepy voice, “only the journey of a simple soul,” another of them would say, in sleep, “there’s not a word that

stands the answer.” The dawn would come, quickly, the embankment a solidity going onwards between mist-hidden fields, the fine smoke from the low-burned fires drifting in thin layers, the aura of the sun about to fall upon the dial of the world. Soon a cock would crow. The sun had touched his nature even though the hour was cold and deep within the boundary of night, and the boundary itself imagined and unseen.’

‘How did you meet your friend?’ asked *Ariel*.

‘He was on the track, alone. His suit was new, then, and fitted him badly, shoulders broader than his. I was walking behind him, as I am now, not following, I follow no-one, no-one follows anyone, but the track constrains, so it does, you have to make up your mind and follow the course it gives, that’s the end of it, we were walking at much the same speed. It was near dawn. Sometimes I could see him vaguely in the mists. Sometimes I could hear some small thing of him. Sometimes a hand-print on a stone where he had brushed the dew from his clothes. Sometimes the print of a foot. When the sun was risen he found a place to sleep. When he was asleep I sat next to him. It was as near as I could get to having company.

They were walking fast, drawn to the distant vanishing-point.

‘I said to you, told you that I used to watch the sleeping faces. That’s all I said then, but my shyness was everything about me. I used to watch them and imagine their character. I can read a face. Oh, not for my own purposes, I wanted nothing. But sometimes I would begin a talk between some sleeping person and myself, imagining that I knew them, Oh, let us say for an example an old man who had been present at my birth, we would speak together, the hours remote, the time would pass, some animation of the face, and he would speak, I would speak, and perhaps a wind would spring up across the place, from a place unknown, fan his thin hair across his head, he would in the deepness of his sleep speak to me, from the deeps of sleep, what is the nature of a person in the finery of character, some little thing would pause, he would awake, his waking face now blank, something surfaces, what it is I do not know, do I know you? Is your face so strange to me? From what town do you come and would I know it? Are you a simple soul? Can you speak? What words are yours?’

‘The man in the distance, whom I had followed. I sat beside him in the sun. The air was drowsy. The last flying insects of the year. Soon the frosts would come, and cut them down. You would see the bodies, still holding onto stems. The coming days, even in the hours of late and transitory heat, would have no more the buzz of summer. The seasons were turning. I looked down at him. I saw his face. He was no more asleep than I. He was lying on his back, in a traveller’s careless way, but his eyes were open, not in sleep, but in some deep and open stare. A sweat was on him. His face, which had seemed so restful, was full of fear. I could see this, perhaps no other could have seen, I don’t know much, I make no pretensions as to what I know, when you don’t know much you can look deeply, that’s truthful, that’s when you see despair in another’s eyes. O he could see me from the corner of his eye, but my presence was nothing to him when set against the thing at which he stared. What was it? The day was bright, none more so, the world led away in its two directions, open to the eye. What was there to fear? How could it be passed from the feared thing to him? I was myself afraid. I looked behind me more than once, I tell you. Nothing moved. We might have been alone in the world: we were alone as far as the eye could see. Yet the feeling that they were about to kill us both.’

‘Who are “they”?’

‘I never knew, you never know these things until they happen, at the time I thought, as you would, that he had enemies, people who pursued him, no reason to the thought, no natural disaster about to happen, the sky was cloudless. What dreadful things could hail down from a cloudless sky? Plenty. Perhaps he stood on a horizon unknown to me and could see the thing beyond it.

‘I sat by him. He was sweating. A fear of hell, was it? I saw no signs of the place, smelled nothing. The past? The fall from an unknown place to which some drug or other had taken him? As I watched he passed into unconsciousness. Nothing could have disturbed him. I had no water, but there was a slate cistern close by. It took the water from a spring, by an iron pipe. It was clean and deep. The rays of the sun penetrated to the sandy bottom. I saw the outline of my own head. The ripples as I put

the cup beneath the surface, my old chipped cup with *The Swan Hotel* written on it. I sponged his face with the cold water.’ The small man began to mime his own actions. ‘I gave him a little brandy, diluted, forced between the lips. Whether this was good or bad I did not know. He was breathing heavily, his limbs were stiff, his movements were uneven, a jerkiness, my mind went through the old stories, you’ll never know the streets where I was born, it passed into a natural sleep. I stayed with him. The shadows grew long, and day was past its best. When he woke he took me for granted, I gave him the cup, he drank it dry, I went back to the cistern for more. It was epilepsy, his illness, of the temporal lobe, unusual manifestations, an unsteady wind, ruffling, heard in the ears, something is gone, something is about to happen, what it is unknown, but there’s apprehension in its shadow. Epilepsy of the temporal lobe.’

‘I’ve never heard of it,’ said Ariel.

‘Well I did not know this then, but it was then that I took to him, he was angry about nothing, quite reasonless, he started shouting at me, and that I understood, he was using me as though he understood me, as I understood myself, that’s fair enough, I thought, they are genuine, the things he says, I’m being put to the test as I put myself to the test.

‘Evening drew on and he fell into a deep sleep. I lit a fire. At times like that one expects an oracle. It answers, in some small way which until the oracle reveals itself you took for granted. Something comes into the mind. The wind blows through the fire’s heart, a world’s revealed. No more. But that’s enough, to be going on with. You’ll think badly of me, but I’m as I was made.

‘He woke up in the morning. The dew lay heavily. The fire was out. The air was still, and the ashes were undisturbed, they still kept the forms of the wood. When he woke he saw me, and I saw his uncertain look, of recognition. “I remember you. You are still here.” His voice was strange and airy. I could not answer. I could not speak to a person awake. My tongue would not move. I thought about the words I should use, and they fled. “Can you speak?” I shook my head, which meant, yes, I can speak, that’s what my shaking my head meant, believe it or not, habitual dumbness, that is what he thought, “but can you hear?” my God, yes, I can hear, there is nothing wrong with that, whether the sense is that intended I do not know, no one knows, in a sense there is no-one who could arbitrate, no-one, that would be a hindrance to the way, O I don’t mean the track, that’s only the shadow of a way, arresting though it is, he said, “you’ve known me through the worst of what I am, I know only one half of what I’m doing,” who knows the other half, I said to myself, the words came out, without intention, “who knows the other half,” he said, in an undertone, perhaps he thought it was he who had spoken, maybe it was, perhaps the words were his, “everyone leaves me on my own after a fit,” he said, *a fit*, is that the name you give to it, I said, we travelled together after that, days and nights, we were content to travel together, shared things as we came across them, shared the days, he does not speak, he said to others who we met, in the way, but he hears everything, the world is hearing to him. O I spoke to myself, in the language of my family. Not that there was anything wrong with that. They wanted me married, that I didn’t want, no, it would not have been right, I could no more speak than fly, you are not in my debt, I said, he thought he was, sorrowfully, at last he grasped it, the fact that he was not in my debt, I would look after him when he was absent, which is another way of making it all out, where the temporal lobe is to be found I do not know, why, the brain, inside the temples of the skull, what greater absence than that, the person gone, the fear’s coming one of absence, perhaps, that was conjecture, one of my own. But I made him see that he was in no debt to me, and that was a great thing at the time and still is, one step forward, not much has passed since then, save days. The phrase I got out at last was not the one I planned. What that was I do not know, but what I said was “magnificent weather for September,” that was what I said.’

‘What was wrong with that?’ said *Ariel*, disbelievingly.

‘There was nothing wrong with it, but I didn’t know what it meant, the phrase, if anything, was there a meaning to it which was beyond me? He stopped and stared at me, I thought that he would laugh, he did not laugh, tears came to his eyes and then rolled down his cheek, what was it I had said? Some phrase, picked up, as a child, the place I do not know, inside some shop, some department store,

perhaps, the furniture floor, I can see it partially, in my mind's eye, not a phrase that we would use, except in mimicry, but when I heard it, why, spoken seriously, so unusual, I'll take that phrase, I said, the syllables contracted in my mind, beyond the meaning. That's enough. I lost the use of words.'

'And these things made you dumb?'

'If that's what dumbness is. Is that what you would call a dumbness? I don't say that you are not right. Oh, at the hospital they bandied words above my head, forgetting I could hear, or perhaps they were beyond caring whether I could hear or not. They had other matters that concerned them, other things to worry them, my own the least amongst them: I had a kind of stock of phrases to get me out of trouble, which I never used at home, they being phrases which more truly belonged to the talk of people who passed in the streets and who had nothing to say to one another. Not that they were to me a stock of phrases. I never listed them. The idea of a stock was theirs.'

'You speak well, now.'

'Do you think so? What I say doesn't come over as a repertoire of phrases?'

'No.'

'I am pleased by that.'

*

They walked together, the tall man in the middle.

'How far we have come,' said the little man.

'We have come no distance,' said the thin man, 'When you walk it is as if the track moved and you stood still.' He stared at the little man, who shrugged his shoulders – his most expressive gesture – and stared back at him. They stopped walking, and stood in silence regarding each other.

'We have travelled far,' said the little man. 'We knew nothing of this place here when we started off this morning.'

'You stand still and the days pass,' said the thin man, shivering a little. 'Other ways are few and poorly known.' He looked unhappily down at the ground. The small man stood by his side, allowed him to put a hand on his shoulder, as though he were unsteady. *Ariel* heard the words clearly, though they were not intended for his hearing. 'It is not me, of that I am certain, there's the unsteady ruffling of a wind that I can feel on my skin, over all my limbs and rising to my head.'

*

They both stared at him. He saw something on the skyline that made him anxious. 'An animal will see things so: I've seen a horse regard a thing unseen.' The small man took his arm. 'I'll find you a quiet place,' he whispered, and, turning to *Ariel*, he said, 'nothing like this did I see in my ragged-arsed childhood.' He began to lead the tall man away.

Ariel, unclear as to what he might do, stood on the top of the track, looking down at the plain from the high embankment. He put down his burden. I can do nothing, he said, they see it as a private thing. He looked along the line of the track. The stones of the ballast shimmered in the heat, and, in the distance, the track itself became a tenuous and an uncertain thing. You can no longer trust your sight, said *Ariel*, with regard to distance, form and direction are at the horizon one. How long have we been travelling? The hills seemed as distant as they had been in the early morning, more so, for a heat-haze had developed. How many valleys and peaks were imaginary and how many were real? He looked down at the burden he had been carrying. Close at hand, but no longer with any meaning. He sat on a wooden baulk which lay not far away. He could no longer recall with any clarity how he had found himself in prison. Perhaps I am not who I thought I was, he said, to himself, but not in words, he could remember little of the court beyond its being full of people: boyhood, youth, imprisonment, that was how it seemed to go, that was how the order went, a prosecution mild to begin with and uneasily ineffectual, only at odd times could one grasp what was going on, at certain times of day, it seemed

nothing to do with me, he said, to himself, what did I surrender in exchange for bail, what they expected me to surrender. The day to day commonplaces, perhaps. Not allowed beyond the town gates. Not allowed beyond one's own age, that's a kind of trespass. He looked around himself. The day was anything but silent, anything but still; earlier in the year the skylarks would have risen, each in its own region, to the horizon, in all directions. Now the seed-heads and the dried stems of last year's foxgloves rattled together in the faint wind. A tall yellow-flowering plant was being eaten by a horde of brindled caterpillars. Voracious, knowing in some way that the year was turning fast. An untimely thought. I was not pursued, he said, not persecuted. That was something else. Maybe one day I shall know what it is. I'm out of the city, and, perhaps, I'm out of my age. But her room, her courtyard: she was not confined. Would she have praised anything I might have done? I don't know. No, she would not. What did she see in me? I do not know what to think of that. What did she see in me? I don't know.

He looked at the wad of pages. It looks like a love-story to me. Much was made of the specialist evidence, more so than the facts supported, the doctors who hardly knew me from the image which they had of me. I thought they were attacking the dignity of another, not mine, never did I know the word, in the way in which it is set out to mean, in truth, it's you they are attacking, that is what I said, a strange thing to learn, how old was I, no age, a summer out of school, it gathered strength with a steadiness, like a tide, you are as a person inundated. Yet I had not known the extent of what I had done. One has to swim when the flood takes your feet from under you, when you are under it is opaque, suddenly the clear air. Certainly one's not born knowing good from bad, as a child you see the look of reproach from your friend, injuries unseen, I'll not do that again, I had not known how wrong I was. What estimate do I have of myself? No answer. Has it changed since I left the court? I don't know. Why have I been so mild in the presence of these two travellers? On my release I thought I should be a man alone. Others' presence and resentment going together, travelling by night. This has not been true. What's the cause? Why no resentment? Because they are in the same boat as I? Oh, no questions, not even to yourself, *Ariel*, all you'd do is to lead yourself. Where? On. Some place where you cannot see and which you will with the coming of the exigency have to tear yourself from. Why have I gone along with them? Oh, they are beyond the city and in a certain sense beyond the age. Independent of time, believe what's laid out before the eye, daybreak by daybreak. Don't distort. Who else is there on the road. That's no question. That's a state of mind.

*

It was late in the day when the small man returned. The afternoon was worn away and the colours were draining from the sky. *Ariel* saw the small man in outline, against the sky.

The small man was searching, his mouth open, the set of his body tense. He saw *Ariel*. 'You are still here?' he asked, as though he had been hoping against hope to see him, yet at the same time surprised that he had not gone.

'I'm here,' said *Ariel*, sitting on his baulk of wood. He made no movement; the small man had appeared on the embankment directly in *Ariel*'s line of vision.

'Oh, I don't know whether I thought to see you here or not, probably he's gone, I said to myself, I would have left myself, maybe. Why should he have time for us?' He paused. 'Probably I would have gone. I do not know. You don't talk much, that's something I have noticed, there's much that you see that you pass over without words. A high and empty path, no person on it, that's what I thought to see, I wondered, shall I see him again, and if I see a man shall I recognise him? But when I saw you I knew you, instantly, perhaps before sight was complete, in outline. That's how it is. I saw who you were at once, without so much as a thought, as though I'd known you all my life.'

'There's no need to talk so much.'

'You have never been one for the talk,' said the small man, standing on the level ground in front of *Ariel*'s sight.

‘When I was a child I always wanted to be in the right,’ said *Ariel*, ‘that’s what makes for talk; but when you want to borrow someone else’s correctness no more, well, there’s not much need of it. How is your friend?’

‘Sleeping.’

‘Is there anything for me to do?’

‘No. It’s quiet now.’ The short man looked at the land beyond the railway. ‘On an evening like this I began my life up here. I was pulled up to the track by the tails of my coat,’ he said, ‘not that I was reluctant, someone saw me staring up, with longing, a hand, they said, reach up, the rope was lowered, a bowline, take in slack, that’s me, haul when you are ready, hauling. I was lifted up, with astonishing speed, high inside the arch, tall, from the air how small the streets of my childhood were, how narrow, a little compact corner of the earth, it was unwise, the downward look, at the parapet, too wide to grasp, he’s about to slip from the rope, then the voice of a giant, I have him by the tails of his coat. That’s how I left my home and all I knew. They fed me, looked after me.’

‘Where are they now?’

‘Where are they now? Where do people go in life? Some lose touch, some change, some die.’

‘Enough for the day: we want some food. The foot of the embankment is the place for rabbits: look at this short grass. You’ll see them together in the open spaces, in the last light of the sun. Easy to catch on a slope, by hand, but today’s a day for them; they’re spared; already it’s too dark.’

The western sky was striped with orange lenticular clouds which had formed in the lee of the far mountains, and the light that fell on the plain was of the same deep orange colour. The colour made the green sides of the embankment and the hedges strangely dark, while it emphasised the lightness and the breadth of the stubble fields, and made the grey towers of the churches gently prominent. ‘Not to be taken word for word,’ said the small man, ‘not that the words are untrue: if one is drawn, it might as well be with a rope, and if one climbs out of the predicament one is in, it might as well be up an earth bank, and if one walks along a path it might as well be a path that leads to an end.’

The tall man stood silently behind him; the other two were aware of his presence before they saw him; perhaps he had made some slight sound. The last light of the sun lay on his face, now lined and exhausted. He looked like a man who had been through a trial.

‘Don’t ask him how he is,’ said the short man, his voice a whisper, ‘he doesn’t like it; make out that nothing has happened.’

Ariel looked at the small man, ‘he can hear what you say if I can.’

‘That doesn’t matter.’ He looked away down the track. ‘Does it?’

The tall man said nothing but continued to face the western horizon, shielding his eyes from the level ray of the sun with the flats of his hands, palms over orbits.

‘If he didn’t like the light he should turn the other way,’ said the short man.

The tall man slowly turned so that he faced the darkness of the east; the dying light was now on his back.

‘I shall go, now,’ said the small man, picking a few of his belongings off the ground, ‘but I shall be back as quick as I can, I’ll find something to cook and eat, you’ll have no belief in me if I don’t, and that is something that I am good at, look at the lights of that house down there, in shadow now, in the shadow of the place we are, what a shadow this embankment casts, we are over a bridge, see the light streaming underneath us, smell’s acute at this hour, grows more acute the nearer to dew-fall, remains acute all evening, we are downwind of a hen-run I would think, they would hardly hear the sound, a second’s fluttering, the end’s humanity itself, then all’s as quiet as it was before. Fox, they say, the one that runs along the track beneath the moon, has no home. We don’t know it, go outside, they say, nothing to be seen, to eyes unaccustomed to the night, still the lamp-flame hangs in the centre of the sight, over the foresight, the two barrels cold; the catch’s click, in the yard. The smell of night. Have a fire when I return, a small one, there’s wood enough, a little coppice down below, someone has cut some ash down there — ’

The tall man and *Ariel* sat beside the fire, side by side on the same baulk of wood. ‘It’s all

choice,' said the tall man, 'a freezing back or smoke in the face.' He became silent again. The moon, nearly full, stood on the horizon, more of a ball than a disk, and copper coloured. Three skyline elms, tall and full-grown trees, each accommodating its shape to that of its neighbour, stood complete within its circle, miles away, but in the clearness of the evening it seemed that one could see their every leaf.

The sound of a shotgun sounded in the stillness of the falling night; it was not far away but its direction seemed untraceable. *Ariel* started to his feet. 'What was that?'

The tall man did not move, but stared into the fire. It seemed as if he would not speak, but then he said, 'Someone firing, at nothing. What would there be that one might see?'

'Shall I go down and find him?'

'You are concerned for him,' said the tall man. 'Why? Another would sit there, a smile would cross his face, he would wink.' He looked at *Ariel*. 'You're different.'

Ariel said nothing.

'There's nothing to say,' said the tall man, 'When I first saw you I thought that you were bright, and when you say nothing, that confirms it, for me.' He paused. 'It's difficult for me to know where your brightness lies. Sometimes you seem only half intelligent. You're credulous. Too believing.'

'Am I?' said *Ariel*, looking across the little fire into the darkness.

'Don't you tell lies, like the rest of us?'

Ariel looked at him.

'Say nothing, if you like; that's a statement enough. Everyone you meet hardly knows himself, passes off another's story as his own, makes for himself the place from which he came. And you, you've written it down, so you say, and what you did was used against you. Where's the truth in that?'

'Do you know where you are going?' asked *Ariel*.

'Certainly I do. And you know where you are going, too, or you would not be here. Look at that face in the fire. Who knows what colours judgement? Can you look back at your early life and say it was a whole?'

'I don't want always to be looking back,' said *Ariel*.

'No, you don't, but something of it is always looking at what you do. That's why you know where you are going.'

'When you speak like this, what do your words hang on?' asked *Ariel*.

'This place and night.'

'That's not much.' *Ariel's* voice was dismissive.

'Enough to make a person.'

The shotgun sounded for a second time; the sound more distant, now, and the echoes followed on its heels. 'That's unusual, the second shot.'

Ariel jumped to his feet. 'What is going on down there?'

'Whoever it is with the gun has reached the edge of his property. It is a token thing. He'll hear the shot rattling about in the bushes, heart allayed, won't want to come across a wounded man, will go back to the house, and say, there is no-one, we are alone, looking at his wife's awakened face, attentive eyes, the gun to the bedroom, the window open. The yard-dog sleeps too well, we'll get a younger one that rouses the household over nothing, let him bide, in a few days you'll just turn over in your sleep. Sleep follows soon after when you were up at dawn.'

'He's a cautious man, so have some trust. If he dies on the track it won't be because of sleep-struck farmer. He's always been a careful man. The dogs seem to know him, I don't know how: me, I don't like them and they know it. He's very quiet, has a habit of stooping down lower than he needs to, and he goes about silently. You don't know how silently he can move and speak. He would put it down to his old shyness, when he used to travel by night. I would put it down to the fact that he's a born thief, a thief for the sake of it. Does he know the other, who he thieves from? Who knows? You have to know yourself to throw out knowledge so wide. Otherwise you keep it to yourself and never use it. He will be getting a few potatoes together now. Whoever he awakened will be asleep.'

They fell silent.

The night was closed round them, and the fire glowed hot. *Ariel* built a little bank of stones to the leeward of the fire. He glanced at his companion. 'This reminds me of my childhood.'

The tall man shrugged his shoulders, a gesture that reminded *Ariel* immediately of the little man. How much have you two obtained from each other? This was the question which often came to his mind, but he did not ask it.

'Yes, it reminds me of mine.' The tall man paused. 'Each of us looks back over considerable distances.' He drew in a long breath. 'Were you there, this afternoon?'

'When?' asked *Ariel*.

'During the fit. I thought I saw you.'

'No,' said *Ariel*, 'I was on the embankment.'

'I thought I saw you, but perhaps that's nothing. There's no level ground, then, and I don't know where I stand.' He looked into the dark of the night as though he heard a noise; he was silent, and then *Ariel* heard it, too, a muffled wing-beat at the threshold of hearing. Soon it was gone. 'A barn owl,' said the tall man, 'though I seem to hear it still. Do you?'

'I have heard it for some time,' said *Ariel*, 'very distant, growing no closer. Yes, I can still hear it.'

'A barn owl, quartering the fields. Epilepsy of the temporal lobe. That's the name they give to it.' The night fell deeper about them. 'Some little change of mood, perhaps, attributing a meaning to something heard, oh, I don't know what, a little sound, the winding of a distant ratchet, unsteadily, something seen from the corner of the eye, the feeling of a rising wind when the air is still, and the mists hang close upon the ground, background to the world. It starts so mildly. I don't know if the world is changing or myself. Perhaps it's change itself, change's nature, as though it were a force like gravity —'

The moon had risen. 'There's the owl we heard,' said *Ariel*, 'gliding across the fields, no shape to it in the moonlight.'

'No shape to it,' said the tall man, 'you give it a name but you wouldn't know what it was. It's passing, now. Sometimes I feel a restless presence overheard, above us all, and that's when I know and plan the next few days, Keep low, keep low and out of sight, that's what I say to myself, keep low and its sight will move away.'

They sat in silence.

'Footsteps, in the grass. He's confident in his walk. The fire's ready.'

IV

They continued their journey by night. The track ahead of them was radiant in the moonlight and the fields underneath the embankment were clothed in a dense mist; only the tops of the trees and the embankment itself were visible. There was not the slightest wind and every sound they made had an echo in the natural world.

They walked for hours in the night. Neither of *Ariel's* companions showed any signs of tiredness; as he looked at their backs he asked himself, what drives them on to do this? The reasons which they give are afterthoughts; tomorrow there will be other explanations. But how could it be different? I don't know this place as my own, and I'm sceptical, and my heart's not in it.

The two men in front turned round, their faces without expression, or, perhaps, holding the same expression, the moonlight falling obliquely across their faces.

'You must be done in,' said the tall man.

'No,' said *Ariel*, pausing, 'there is a long way to go.'

'My God, you're right in saying that, never a truer word,' said the tall man, 'in time you'll know as though by some unheard-of sense where the breaks are in the path, where there's rusty iron shin-high. There's a long way to go, it's a fact, and one which does not stand a question.'

They continued to walk. The mist was thicker, now, and the dew lay heavily on their coats, on the fur of the small man's lapels and hat. A fire, not far away; a few embers, brightening and darkening in some local movement of the air. The small man touched *Ariel's* sleeve, paused in his step, did not whisper, but breathed out softly and vocally through his nose, mouth closed, *nn*, a universal sound of warning.

The three of them stood looking at the sleeping band of travellers, they seemed in the deepest part of sleep, their faces turned to the dying fire, from which a little tongue of flame licked out, painting everything in its orbit with a brief yellow light, the closed eyelids and the sleeping faces, the strand of hair across the hand which lay across the cheek, I'm no good with numbers, they fill no space in me, why, nought to one is not the same as one to two, persons are beyond the numbering, five, six of them, asleep, seven, maybe, an old man, look, impossible to guess his age, how his life was spent he himself in sleep would hardly know, extreme of life, the flesh is going from him, accepts it, one sees the movement of the eye beneath the lid, skin not far above the bone, an old woman, how similar they are, when they leave the earth it will be in one same night, a younger man, my age, in the arms of a woman, you look upon that which you know, her hand across his shoulder, the child asleep between their legs. What world is different from this?

They pass in silence.

Some distance away, under the arch of a bridge, the small man said, his voice so soft that, were it not for the intense silence which lay over the track, his words would have been lost, 'you see how it is, everything is here, I was telling you about men and women such as these,

'you don't know who they are, sometimes it seems so, sometimes it seems you can't but know them, did you see the old man?'

'Yes,' said *Ariel*. The old face in repose, dignity of worn age, full beard pale and silver in the moonlight, eyes but lightly shut.

It was uncertain why the old man woke; certainly it was no sound which the passing travellers had made. He opened his eyes. His face assumed for the moment a wondering expression, as though he had woken at the bidding of some deep interior question, wordless and profound. He looked across the embers of the fire at the faces of his sleeping family. His gaze rested on each of the sleepers in turn. He looked at the face of the young woman. He looked at the face of the infant. What passed through his mind? He disengaged a withered hand from the blanket, as if he wished to wake his own wife, the woman who slept next to him. Perhaps he wished to show her the peace of place and night, the peace which lay in the repose of the other sleepers. He did not touch her; he knew that she was awake; they had awakened together, in response perhaps to some sound which they alone had heard.

He withdrew his hand into the blanket, and he closed his eyes again.

The three men looked out from the shadow of the bridge, the hard moon's shadow etching on the ground all the gaps and notches where bricks had fallen from the arch. The three men did not look at each other; the tall man said, 'Italic is right, there is a long way to go yet, and he's right, too, in saying that we'll soon have to find another excuse for travelling.'

'You shouldn't need excuses,' said the small man, 'you see it in the distance and you go for it.'

'Yes, but whatever appears in the distance changes as you approach it —'

“Yes, but —,” “yes but —,” did ever a line of words so begun come to anything? Questions in disguises, and the answers hanging on them like tails.'

'Dependent, like tales, and shaking,' said the tall man.

'One day we shall get you married, like that man,' said Short.

'Then whatever might appear in the distance would change. It would change like the shape of a cloud. Which is how things change anyway.'

'Married, family, the responsibility would make you.'

'Yes, but,'

'No, but —'

'Italic *Ariel*, come over here, would you have ever thought that I had been dumb? Oh, some kind of noise through my nose, mouth closed, *nn*,

'— the wisest thing that he has ever said.'

'And now I'm telling him he should be married, some woman will make hay with him, and then he won't speak of change as though it were the town where he was born.'

'You don't know where I was born.' The tall man put his hands on his hips.

'I've seen it, with these two eyes,' said the small man.

'You have not, you have seen nothing, you see nothing, nor ever will, but what you want to be.'

'I want to be nothing other than I am,' he said, jumping off the ground as he walked, his shadow jumping forward also, 'look,' he said, 'forward is the shadow of upward.'

*

The night was flagging.

'Back there —' said the little man.

'Where the people were asleep?' asked *Ariel*.

'Yes, that's the place.'

'I remember it.'

They walked in silence for a little time.

'Did you perhaps think of what I said to you?'

'Yes, I did,' said *Ariel*. 'I thought about it.'

'About the beauty of people who are asleep? And, did you have an inkling of how matters were with me, in my head, when I was dumb, and when I could sit beside people asleep as though they were my family?'

'Yes,' said *Ariel*.

'I had no compulsion to speak — with people awake I was compelled to speak and so was dumb — and so I would sit, near a man asleep, speaking to him, and hearing his words. Do you understand me?'

'I think I do,' said *Ariel*.

'Sometimes I think it is the other who is asleep; sometimes I think that it is me. Do you understand me?'

'Yes, I do.'

*

They rested for a few hours; they had travelled another five miles. The embankment continued, as far as the eye could see, broken here and there by tongues of mist. The tall man stopped suddenly, and looked about himself, his eyes large and observant, his pupils, night-wide, taking in the scant light. 'I remember someone saying something about this piece of land,' he said, 'how it all fits into place, as it were, something seen before – ' He looked at the small man. 'You were with me: how easily the description comes to mind.'

'Yes, it does, even with this mist,' said the smaller man, earnestly.

Ariel could hardly tell whether he was joking or not, the night was still dark and surely they were too tired for irony; yet *Ariel* could not tell this place from any other through which they had travelled.

'Why is this unique?' he asked, abruptly.

The other two men looked at him as though they did not grasp the question. The smaller man drew breath as though to begin an answer, but he did not speak. They stood in silence, looking at *Ariel*, *Ariel* looking at them: had another been watching it might to them have seemed an animosity had risen between them.

'What is unique about this place?' asked *Ariel*.

The small man began to speak on the heels of the question, his voice loud and flat. 'Ask me! Ask me! You get to know when men and women on the road are speaking truthfully and when they're romancing, it's not hard, anyone can read the map of thought, things are pointed out to you, some of them you meet have the ability to see ahead, you can see it from a distance, it does not do to doubt the gifts they have, sometimes they look you in the eye, and say, a bad place, a bad place, that, travel through it in the dead of night, when the moon is thin, when the clouds above have no rift between them, the road is straight and easy, you'd walk it in your sleep, you'll follow it without a deviation on the high embankment — '

'How do you know that we have come to this place?'

'Look.' The tall man pointed into the night. 'Do you not see that leaning signal in the mist? And, beyond, the rusting water tower? This is the place; it answers all that I was told.'

'It might be any railway yard,' said *Ariel*, astonished.

The tall man looked at him. 'That's true enough. It's a big village; a small town.'

'They will throw stones at you as soon as they see you, and their dogs are vicious: they do not bark; they bite to take your flesh and not to make a point.' The small man spread out his arms.

'Why are they hostile when you do them no harm?' asked *Ariel*.

'How do we know what has happened in the past? They remember one thing; we another; and I am not sure who I mean by we, apart from him and me. But you won't know their dialect; if you are seen you have to take what you are given; they'll make no attempt to understand you, and they are all like that; the more ragged you are the more they think that you do not feel the stones and the harder they are thrown. You have no feeling, they say on hearing the unresisting sound, it is what you deserve, they might as well say, probably it is what they do say, "it is what is coming to them, it is what they need."'

'We might as well sleep here, said the tall man, lying down on the instant of his speaking, on his back, his hands behind his head. 'We can go on tomorrow night.'

'What do you do for shelter when the bad weather sets in?' asked *Ariel*.

Short began a speech of some complexity, as though he were playing all the parts in a play. 'Oh, we shall be where we want to be before the worst of it, you can be sure of that, in a safe place and in front of a fire; as for now, it's all within a moment, you have to put up with the weather as it arrives, even as you see the swift black clouds on the horizon edge, even as you see the downward columns of the rain, you know that it will soon be over. Coverts, barns not far from the track, huts that once belonged to the railway, some of them still have their stoves and grid-iron fireplaces, never any glass left in the windows, you can cover the metal casements with sacks, or something, keeps out the wind,

and then you have a home, what could be better, in the warmth, look up into the roof, was there any other place but this, any better place, listen to the rain, someone heard outside, unknown footsteps, bare feet in the mud, recognisable the sound, he owns no shoes, may I come in, from the rain, the figure at the door, who it is you do not know, someone never seen before, a moment's search of the face, enough, rain running from the coat, hands red and raw, bare legs, his age unguessable, dry yourself, at the fire, thank you, I heard the sound of the harmonica, and saw the oil-lamp, thank you for your fire, he says, a low voice, to himself, not my fire, not my railway, not mine the dispensation of the world, what is to become of us, he says, tomorrow I meet my wife, he says, tomorrow? I say, she travelled on ahead, he says, I had things to attend to, things to finish, I waited, I delayed, you delayed, I say, I delayed, one day, one night, I thought to meet her today, he says, or maybe it was yesterday, no-one have I met all day, I fear I might have lost her: my wife! Yesterday I had a wife! Where is she now? Have you eaten, say I, or another in the corner, who had not spoken until that moment, yes, I have, he says, one more untruth to save the face, here is some bread and cheese and some small onions, say I, the bread is dirty and a little stale, it had a fall and came down hard, but you won't mind that, thank you for this, he says, it's not mine. Look: there's a woman on her own approaching us. She's good-looking. Poor woman. Is she your wife? No, she's not my wife. Open the door for her. Warm yourself, sweet lady. Thank you. I'm done for. Exhausted. Famished. You are welcome to what we have.' Short finished his play, still looking up at the sky. 'Do you hear a strange sound? A chain swinging in the wind?'

'There is no wind,' said the small man, answering his own question.

The discomfort of the track was mitigated, in the place which *Ariel* chose to sleep, by the profuse growth of a plant, which next morning turned out to be bedstraw, appropriately enough. He lay on his side using his package for a pillow. He looked along the track. There was no sign of any person. The stars were bright.

They slept until the morning sun awoke them. The sun was high, above the rusting water-tower which had the old station-name painted on its side. The chain of the discharge valve swung in the morning wind, rattling from time to time against the water-tower's legs. What was the station's name? That he could not remember, nor even whether enough of the lettering remained to be deciphered.

*

There's no hurry to start a day like this. Shall we put the idea of forward progress behind us? The railway yard was empty and the tracks and sidings were hidden in the long grass. The mists of the night would soon disperse, and the day would grow hot.

The tall man was standing in the shade of the water-tower.

'Where is Short?' asked *Ariel*.

'Down there. By the river we crossed. He'll be washing himself.'

'I must do the same.'

Ariel went down to the river to wash himself. As he stood by the bank he saw the little man drying himself on a piece of clean sacking, a needless act, for the sun had grown hot and would dry him in a few minutes; perhaps it was the harshness of the hessian which pleased him.

The water was cold and clear; as *Ariel* dived the little man spoke to him eloquently, beseechingly, seeing *Ariel's* moving nakedness enter the water but knowing that he himself, and all he said, and all the meaning in his words, remained unheard. *Ariel*, swimming under water, eyes open, passed into the dark shadows of the bridge; he broke the surface and the sound he made was reflected back to him from the high brick vault of the arch. He swam peacefully in the middle of the river amongst the echoes. You hear nothing but the water here, he said. The current is strong, he thought. He saw a little island in the sun beyond the bridge, and he swam to it, a quick crawl, a few strokes and he was on the gravels of its shore. He felt the movement of the stones beneath his feet. He stood amongst the grasses, the sun drying him. He looked downstream. The stubble-fields stretched emptily away, the few re-

maining wheat-stalks hardly disturbed by the light wind. He saw the gentle rise of the solitary hill, to which the railway embankment ran in a slow curve. On the shoulder of the hill lay the town, facing south, in the heat, red roofs and grey stone. He climbed to the wooded centre of the island, the sun hot on his body.

Back in the river the current was stronger than he had supposed, I am hungry he said, where am I going, a few strokes from a good swimmer, and he was in the shade of the arch, and then beyond: he stood in the shallows by the brick landing-platform where the little man stood, dressed in his ragged suburban clothes, his hair drying unbrushed on his head.

'You are a good swimmer,' he said admiringly.

'I enjoy deep water,' said *Ariel*.

'I can see that,' said the little man, 'it's your element, I've never seen a man move more freely, but it's not for me; the current's strong; I would be swept away. Panic would take hold of me, obliterate my judgement. What were you looking at from the island?'

'Over the fields: the town against which you were warned.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say it was a warning. You must be getting cold.'

'No, I'm not cold.' He climbed out of the river. Water streamed from his body, down his legs and from his genitals, darkening the dust of the landing-stage.

'Have you any soap?' asked the little man.

'The soap they give you when you leave them,' said *Ariel*, opening his pack. He held the large rounded bar of soap in his hand and looked down at it before lathering his hair, his face and his body. He returned to the water.

'The town seemed quiet enough to me,' said *Ariel*.

'It wasn't a warning we were given,' said the little man, crouching beside him.

'What was it, then?'

'It was a wary admonition. Take care, you don't know what will happen. Maybe nothing. It's a warning, then, but not in words.' He looked at *Ariel*, who stood with the water to the top of his thighs. The suds and foam from his washing were distant, now, borne away by the powerful current. 'How far did it seem to the town?'

'Four miles, I'd guess. The railway goes straight through the heart of the place.'

'That's a true word, Italic, it is as direct as any road could be, it goes through the heart of every habitation.'

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They came to the town at ten o'clock, the sound came out of the clock-tower as they approached, a midmorning hazy in the heat. The town was no distance below them but it might have belonged to another world. They walked quickly, making a good pace along the track which wound over the gently curving course of the railway between the trees and bushes.

'How still it is,' said *Ariel*.

'If you can't get past at night, then midmorning's the best time, that's a known fact,' said the tall man.

'Many people have said that; it's become something of a saying,' said the little man.

'It's quiet and there's no feeling of hostility,' said *Ariel*.

THE ADMONITION

They walked along in silence for a while. 'It was an open admonition,' said the little man, I recall it well, one night – it seems hard to talk of it in daylight, it seems unreasonable, but imagine that the heat and light were gone and that a heavy rain pattered in the leaves – he was an old man, standing beneath a tree. He had an able and a vigilant look: his eyes were vital and active. I could smell the wet

proofed canvas of his coat, long about him. The railway ran onward, behind him. He held a storm-lantern, its flame low. He spoke. "Wait. Stand where you are. Give me your entire attention." He took a few paces — measured, rather — towards me. "I know you by your name," he said, astonishing me, I didn't disbelieve him, never thought of disbelief, stood looking at him, all I could do, I had never seen him before. "What is my name, then?" I asked him. "Never mind that, I know it," he said, "it is not for you to test me: for you it is enough to hear me." He paused.

Whereas, By the appropriate Act the Admonition is to be made by the Admonisher to the person to be Admonished;

Whereas, The Admonition is to be heard with care and thought towards its every corollary;

Whereas, The Preamble is thus over; now therefore let the rubric stand.

"Now to the text of the Admonition proper. I shall speak the rubric." He paused again. I gave him all my attention. For the first time in my life I was knowingly in the presence of an Admonisher.

"You are an Admonisher, sir!" I exclaimed. The rain was teeming down. "What I am is not for you to consider," said the old man. "In seven days you'll be at such-and-such a place. Be careful there. Trust nothing other than your senses and your feelings, perhaps not even they: listen to no arguments, close your ears to the sense of others. Do not stop there. Do not rest there. Don't so much as rest by sitting on a wall or leaning on a fence. I know no more: I can say no more — I could elaborate on what I have said, but for clarity's sake I'll speak no more to you. That's all I have to say." "How shall I know the place?" I asked. "You'll know it by its name: people will mention it: it will be written there, above the platform. Can you read?" He stared at me. "I have a friend who can read," I said. "That's all I can say, believe me or not, it's all one to me: I see pasts and futures as though they were the present: unhappy faculty — I could embroider this, but do not wish to cloud your insight. When the place is reached, keep on," he said, "no discourtesy of farewell. Don't be drawn in arguments, keep on. I have not seen your face, will not know you when next we meet. That's the Admonition completed. Heed it. The rubric is over." Swiftly he must have gone: I did not see that he had gone for some long time. The little man had been walking behind *Ariel*, the path narrow, and *Ariel* could hear his words and imagine his expression.

THE END OF THE ADMONITION

The tall man said: 'there's a strong feeling against those on the railway amongst some who live here; that's what I have heard; and there's a provincial magistrate; he's said to be hot, you are hardly human, he is said to think, whether he says it or not I do not know, but he acts upon it, that's what I have heard, look down there, that might well be his house — ' He pointed down from the embankment to a tall town house, built of stone, four storeys high; from the ground its roof would be hidden by the parapet. ' — that's probably his house, narrow, tall, examines everything; I can see no-one at the windows. That's where he lives.'

'Yes,' said the little man, 'I'm certain of it.'

'Why should this be? You have done no harm to anyone,' said *Ariel*.

'I wish that were true,' said the little man.

'We've done nothing of importance, a few small things, from ignorance, largely,' said the tall man, 'I speak for both of us, but you get a name, you take on the identity of everyone who passes through, in their eyes, whom you have never known, whom you have never seen; one small thing happened years ago, don't ask me what it was, or perhaps the small thing never happened, they think it will happen in the time to come, in the near future, perhaps, they'll look at you, and say, he's about to do something which we don't like, look at the way he goes to it, changes his name with every day that comes, juggles the stance of his past with every hour, and they forget that they are like that, too, we know our past, that's what they say, you have no past that we acknowledge, you offend by your pres-

ence, the magistrate will say, what a waste of time the trial, what a waste, imprisonment at the public expense.'

What strange superstitions, said *Ariel* to himself.

'Do you think that they are superstitions? Is that what you think? Do you think we make them up upon the road, sheltering from the rain beneath an arch? Do you think we measure time in days of travel? Have you seen a road more straight than the road of days? If these are superstitions, then all knowledge partakes of superstition. Perhaps that is not far from the truth. You think we shift our stance from day to day, and you are right; but beneath the adaptation to the day we do not change. That which you know you have always seen before. We have seen these things for ourselves. But you're free, now, you don't have to believe us.'

The derelict railway cut through the town.

The embankment ran on, straight as a die, across land level once more, making no allowance for the presence of the town. The main road ran through a high Roman arch in the embankment. *Ariel*, standing on the bridge, stopped walking, looked down at the town, his sight drawn by its complexity. The other two men, seeing him stop, grasped him by his arms. 'Do not hold me, I will not be constrained, not by you, nor by anyone,' he said, his voice suddenly loud; you could hear its echoes from the roofs and the walls of the houses below; even these echoes of his voice were filled with authority; one would have said that another had spoken; the men at his sides let go of his arms at once and backed away from him, looking at his face; he looked from one to the other; 'I will never be constrained by anyone,' he said, with a final authority.

'Come on, please come on with us,' said the small man, but in such a subdued tone, and so muffled with anxiety that you had difficulty understanding him; his eyes did not meet *Ariel's* gaze.

'This is surely no place to stop,' said the tall man, 'stop here and it'll be the end of you, did you not hear him speak of the apparition and its warning?'

Where knowledge has its limit, there superstition waits. I've heard something of the kind, sonorous, the prison chaplain, perhaps, giving what he did not know a dignity it did not need, said *Ariel* to himself.

Ariel stood in the heat, one boot firmly on the ground, the other resting solidly upon a block of stone, a milepost, perhaps. His arms were crossed.

Ariel saw no reason for either anxiety or agitation; the day was a day like any other and the town an unremarkable town, empty in the midmorning heat. No doubt its people were going about their business in the shade. Nothing was moving except for the shadows of the little clouds which flowed across the roofs and fields.

'We must go on,' said the tall man, 'we have been lucky so far.'

'Luckier than we deserve,' said the short man.

'Do you think the future will ever be dissimilar to this?' asked *Ariel*, still standing between them.

'It's not the time to think of things like that,' said the tall man.

'Anywhere else you can speculate and spend your life in thought, but not here, this is the place for quietness and speed,' said the small man, 'hands' edges to temples, so we'll go on, here it's best not to think, you'll be alarmed by what comes to mind: so, as we both say, it's best to go on without the least consideration of the place through which we go. Blinkered horses trust and do not shy.'

'What he says is true,' said the tall man, 'you are at your most vulnerable here, pause in thought and you'll lose the best part of your will.'

'The place is certainly quiet,' said the short man, making an unthinking matter-of-fact statement. 'What day of the week is it?'

'Tuesday,' said *Ariel*.

'You know such things with certainty, do you?' asked the small man, wanting no answer, nothing questioning in his voice. While he spoke he leaned with his back against the wooden parapet of the bridge; then he paused, as if wondering whether he should continue speaking in the hot fore-

noon, what he might have said he did not know; none of them spoke, it was difficult to tell what any of them were thinking, all their previous words had vanished and it seemed that they were three men who had met that morning by chance, in hemi-recognition; the tall man's face was in shade, and as he stooped, his face lowered, it was difficult to tell his expression. The short man looked either way along the railway, back to the bridge over the river where *Ariel* had dived in the early morning, forward, to the unknown straightness ahead where the track wavered in the heat-haze, you would make out nothing more clearly with a telescope, he thought to himself, all you'd see would be the shimmering, right to the disk of the pale daytime moon, what else one might see I do not know, he asks why we should quit this town as fast as we are able: well I know the answer, but not the words for it, never have I known the words for much, but we can't stay here, could not stay yesterday in the place we were, one day – and what a day that will be. Shake the sand from my shoes, the dust of the day, the little gravels, the stones.

'Do you know the town's name?' asked *Ariel*.

The small man flung his arms out, his mouth open, his eyes wide with his intensity. For a moment *Ariel* thought that he had done this out of exasperation, but even in the second that he looked at him he saw that this was not so. The man was filled with fear, a premonition beyond words.

They saw the reason for it. There was nothing they could do. They were too far away.

The parapet of rotten wood had soundlessly given way. The rail was sagging backwards under the man's weight, out over the void beyond the bridge. He had flung out his arms to grasp something, to hold something. His face was white, stared down at the solid brickwork from which his feet were slipping. He made a move to grasp the rotten rail.

With a cracking sound the wood gave way, and the little man fell to the road below.

They stared down at him. He lay on his back, one of his legs crumpled under him. His belongings lay scattered about him, the railings of the decayed parapet round him. Blood had started to trickle from his ear.

Ariel ran down the track to the steep grass slope of the embankment, and began to clamber down, half jumping, half falling. He heard the voice behind him, 'Don't go down there, Italic! Come back *Ariel!* *Ariel!* what good can you do now? What good can anyone do? Can't you see his neck's broken, *Ariel?*'

Ariel looked back up at the gaunt figure with its arms upraised, it seemed he did not recognise it. Then he stood in the darkness of the arch. The road stretched emptily away. The loss of height had altered all perspectives. He moved the wood that lay over the body. He knelt down. The man was still breathing but with a peculiar waxing and waning respiration. What does that mean? What must I do? The eyes were open and the pupils were wide. He is already dead, said *Ariel*. The eyes stared straight ahead, looking at nothing.

The street was empty. *Ariel* looked up and down, toward the town square, beyond the bridge, where a few tall houses stood. Where to find a doctor? Is he not already dead? There's no feeling of life, even though for the moment he breathes. *Ariel* stood up, prepared to run to the nearest house for assistance, but, before he had covered a dozen yards, he stopped and returned to the small man.

The eyes stared sightlessly. Respiration had stopped, and a tremor ran through the body.

V

Ariel sat on a ragged leather-covered horsehair couch that stood in the vestibule of the town hall. He had been told to sit there. Through the open door the sun passed to its peak. Outside in the square the shadows were short and dense.

An hour ago he had been standing on the railway above the arch of the bridge and staring down at the open portal into the deep darkness where he now waited. Now he looked back from the darkness of the building to the railway bridge with the broken parapet. In the shadow of the arch stood a group of unmoving men staring down at the body of the dead traveller, hardly visible in the bridge's shadow. They made way for a horse and cart which came from a street beyond the railway arch. He saw their distant gesticulations as though they were far away, inaccessible, perhaps in the past. The body was lifted into the cart. It was covered with a coarse, dark horse-blanket. The cart drew away; the horse seemed to draw the cart without a signal — without a word or action from the carter: perhaps the animal knew the man's mind as its own. Several of the men and youths sat on the cart's tail, the feet of the body between them. Their legs and bodies swayed with the movement of the cart. The cart passed into the dark shadow of the bridge, as though it were the still water of a night-ford, and was then out in the sunlight beyond. The sound of the horse's hoofs diminished rapidly beyond the bridge and the cart passed into silent distance, leaving the sun and the shadow of the embankment and the town.

Do I know this place? asked *Ariel*, perhaps aloud, the echo returned to him at once, from the upward-running staircase and the latticed lift-shaft and from the brown painted doors. Yes, I do know it, he said, in recognition rather than to give an answer to its question, I know the generality. The paint was peeling and, near the floor, the plaster bulged with damp. Who would have thought I should find myself here. He closed his eyes and in the eye of his mind he saw the track, straight as an arrow, leading from his eye to the horizon, the day, the weather, the hour unplaceable, rain, sun, night, dusk, firstlight, the pause before the dawn, himself, any name which might be drawn to mind, the place without a record. Always a man and always a skyline: some long straight thing between them, a cord, a line, a way. The silence in the building was intense. You could hear the working of the brain, said *Ariel*, and then there was a trembling of the air, the lift-cage's door pulled to, on an upper floor; the motor began to turn, the lift descending: the men inside it saw *Ariel* immediately, looked at him, in their descent. The gates clattered open; how many came out — I am not sure, said *Ariel*, quietly, to himself.

'I told him to remain here in the vestibule,' said one, 'as he is the only witness to the death: a witness who's name's unknown, no identity, possessions, oh hardly worth the talking of.' He held the door open for a fat man of intermediate height: perhaps he was the mayor, perhaps a magistrate. There was the slow manner of provincial dignity about him: a fly settled on his forehead: the other man fussed about him, rubbing his hands together, bowing from time to time, flicking the fly away, while the mayor stood silently, aware of his own presence.

Ariel stood, half out of deference, half in readiness for flight.

'Why do you stand?' asked the small man, the official, 'you have no question to ask.' The turned to the mayor, his voice staccato and noisy, 'the driver was told to be here at eleven,' he said.

'That has long gone,' said the mayor, gently, his voice slow and even sleepy, though he had spoken the words as if each had had an individual significance.

The mayor stood at the door, in the shadow, playing with the gold albert which spanned his waistcoat. His black coat was long and his trousers were unpressed and wide. He was aware that *Ariel* was watching him, for he turned to the official. 'I know this young man, surely.'

'I do not think so, sir.'

'I know him.' He turned to look more closely at *Ariel*, his lank body and his long limbs, his large head with its observant face, like a child's, who in his interest in his surroundings has lost any awareness of his own existence; seeing that *Ariel* stared beyond him, the mayor, and into the distance through the arch beneath the railway as though it were something seen upon a different day. 'Is he

waiting for me?’

‘No,’ said the thin man, shifting his meagre weight from one foot to another, ‘he’s there because I told him to be there, as a witness to the accident.’

‘He was the witness of the accident?’ asked the mayor. ‘A man fell from a height and his own weight killed him: and this man saw it?’ He looked again at *Ariel*. ‘Where does he come from? What’s his purpose in this town?’

‘That’s not known,’ said the official, standing in front of *Ariel*, as though to stop *Ariel* and the mayor from looking at one another.

‘What would I think of myself if my son were like him?’ asked the mayor, to himself.

‘I do not know,’ said *Ariel*.

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You cannot ask what links the sequences which fill a day, said *Ariel*, within the vestibule, I am not an audience: this train of events seem like a blackly repetitive morality play, in which I am, the point of which rests somewhere but is never seen. He fell from a height and it was the weight of his person which killed him. He was dead before his breathing stopped. He fell in the middle of his words. If I had meekly followed them along the track he would have heeded the Admonition and would still now be alive.

Ariel waited in the vestibule, sometimes sitting on the horsehair couch, sometimes lying in it and sleeping: sometimes he sat on the floor, and sometimes he paced the walls: once he walked across it on his hands, his neck arched backwards to see his way. Then, suddenly, he sat in the middle of the empty chamber and looked out of the open doors. In a moment he was on his feet walking down the steps and into the sunlight. He stood in the square and looked up at the houses and the shuttered shops, looked along the high colonnade. He walked across the square, his shadow short and dense.

He walked down to the archway of the bridge, looking up at the track as he did so. He saw the track above, empty, the steep embankment without a tenant. He saw the line of tilting telegraph poles running out to a perspective higher than the highest chimneys of the houses. He stood in the shadow of the arch, the arc of darkness across the road. The air was cool. He measured with his eye the hand and footholds in the sloping stonework of the bridge’s wing. The cool air flowed about him. He raised his hands to a wide joint in the stones, six inches above his head, his fingers finding their purchase, the loose muscles of his arms ready to take his weight. Then something drew his vision, a figure standing by the blood-spots underneath the arch. He lowered his arms to his sides.

It was the mayor.

The man walked out from the shadows and stood beside *Ariel*. He squinted up at the sun and the fingers of his right hand touched the brim of his felt hat. ‘You are so desperate that you would try to climb that?’ he asked, looking up at the sloping wall of stone.

‘I’m not desperate. I could climb this easily,’ said *Ariel*.

‘I believe you,’ said the mayor. ‘And only a few metres and a few hours away from the place where he died.’ The sunlight picked out each speck of dust on his faded black suit. His face was the mayor’s face, but how subtly it had changed.

‘You are the priest as well?’ asked *Ariel*.

The other man stood tolerantly. He did not speak for a little while, still looking upward at the object of *Ariel*’s climb. ‘It’s not uncommon,’ he said at length, ‘for the mayor to be the pastor; once it would have been the rule.’ He shook his head and lowered his gaze. ‘In fact I’d say that it was almost universally true even today.’ He began to walk towards *Ariel* who resisted the temptation to retreat from him, and he reached out and took *Ariel*’s arm. He seemed cool enough and at his ease completely when I first saw him, when he thought himself alone, but now I take his arm and he is tense, said the man, to himself, as my son would be.

‘Where do you come from?’ He seemed not to see the canvas suit which had been given to *Ariel*

at his discharge from the prison.

Ariel looked at the man, attempting to find the identity of the person beneath the names, feeling the grip of his hand on his arm and wondering why the man was holding him.

There was a long pause. 'Where do you come from?'

'I heard you,' said *Ariel*, 'but I was trying for a way to answer you. If I speak I want my words to be understood in the way I mean them to be.'

'Are you an innocent?' asked the man, beneath his breath, but *Ariel* heard him.

Ariel said, immediately, 'they say I'm not. For myself, I don't know what it means. I come from the city. The terminus.'

'You've travelled a long way, without stopping, day and night,' said the pastor.

'Not at all.'

'It's an epic of a journey,' said the pastor.

'No, it took me two days only.'

'How did you find your way?' asked the pastor.

'I did not think of it, I take the way as it comes, no decision's to be made, sometimes in the day, sometimes at night, it comes, it is easy: you don't even think of it.'

'Well, you have the look of a man who is telling the truth, but what sort of truth is that, when the journey isn't possible, you'd spend a lifetime at it and then you might be wrong, some turning taken in the past, a fateful day, beneath a glowering sky, tiredness, temptation, O I don't know what! You are so mistaken: senses, urges, longings, how they all are played upon in the gist of one lone person. When you say you think you know the truth it is some little local truth you know. It's a world which encompasses the small possessions which go with you fecklessly from day to day on a track of animals.'

Ariel looked at him in astonishment, feeling the grip of his hand tightening upon his arm.

'As for me,' said the pastor, 'I've never travelled much, the skyline is as inscrutable and as blind as providence, and just as dim, today I've been to say a service for a man who fell from this bridge.'

'It seems a pity, a profound pity, to say a service for a man whose name I do not know,

'Nor where he comes from.'

'Now he is the stranger always.' He began to walk up the road, *Ariel* accompanying him. 'You were a friend of his.'

'Yes, I think I was.'

'Do you know his name?'

'No. He was little and we called him "Short".'

'Nor where he came from?'

'No.'

'Did he tell you anything about his family?'

'Yes, in the idle moments at the end of day he talked about his family, his mother, his brothers and sisters, sharing a bed; beds everywhere; near the window and near morning you'd be wet with condensation from the breath from the sleeping children: he would go outside in the first-light to breathe the clear air; he slept in the cool of the wash-house in summer; had to get up early when the other families needed it. The prints of children's hands on every wall and on the lower panels of every door, the early morning writing on the gennel walls, news enough, the years of growing came and went.'

'How did you meet him?'

'We both were travelling.'

'Why did you leave the city where you were born?' As a mayor the man had seemed to possess the foibles of a provincial mayor: as a pastor he had seemed to possess a cleric's. How does one change to fit a part? Was there any fundamental alteration in the man? Is there a part we aim for and act but do not know? He felt himself closely examined by *Ariel*'s eyes.

'No longer my home.'

‘The city was no longer your home?’

‘That is right. I was driven out, father.’

The pastor continued walking. ‘Why do you call me father?’

‘Is that not right? Are you not a priest?’

‘I wish that you could call me father, but to you it is a wish I should not utter. I am pastor, mayor and magistrate. That is all. Nothing much. Nothing of the priest about me.’

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The pastor held *Ariel* by the arm. The man’s grip was soft but compliant and at first *Ariel* could find no reason for shaking off his hand, saying to himself, it will only be for a little while, I don’t know why he holds my arm, whether he wishes to guide me back into the building, does he think me tired, or, the thought came to *Ariel*, does he grasp me for his own support? In which case does he trust me, or, does he grasp my arm because there is no other at the present who can help him? In which case, again, where shall I take him? Where he wants to go, or where I wish to be? How would he climb the embankment, look at him, I would give him no more than a few days, that’s all he requires, no doubt there are those amongst them who go on crutches, along the way. ‘Where do you wish to go?’ asked *Ariel*.

‘I know where I am going,’ said the pastor, firmly. ‘The question is, do you?’

‘We are crossing the town square again,’ said *Ariel*.

‘What is your name?’ asked the pastor.

‘No name, but what I have been called,’ said *Ariel*.

‘My sight’s not good, I hardly see beyond my arm’s length,’ said the pastor.

‘Is that so,’ said *Ariel*, who did not believe him in the least.

‘Oh, the organs are all right, and the nerves are there, where they should be, they lead where they should lead, there’s nothing wrong with the mind,’ said the pastor, leading *Ariel* into the unwelcome shadow of the dark vestibule. ‘You do not like my gripping your arm,’ he said.

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I feel your resentment,’ said the pastor.

‘I don’t like constraint,’ said *Ariel*: indeed, it was only his resentment which allowed him to believe that the pastor had grasped him to direct his steps rather than for his own support. Had he been weak and held onto me, would I have allowed that? asked *Ariel* to himself, imagining themselves together in some lonely place, where the railway crossed a bleak moor, perhaps: the man on his knees, his black suit mired with travel, holding out his hands beseechingly, his face pale: help me! help me! I would have pulled him to his feet without so much a thought, he said; or, when you help someone, are you then constrained by them? Is that the case? Are you faint because of hunger? Is it thirst? For what do you hunger and for what do you thirst? *Ariel* disengaged the man’s hand with his own fingers, efficiently and quickly: the pastor took a pace backwards as though *Ariel* had injured him.

‘Show some compassion, young man! Please!’ he cried, his voice incredulous that *Ariel* should be so heartless as to withdraw his support: perhaps he, too, was thinking of their being together in a lonely place, not far short of nightfall, and the young man abandoning him by the side of the track: he seemed to hear the howling of wolves.

‘Why are we back in this building?’ asked *Ariel*, looking at the man, trying to interpret his expression, rubbing his own arm.

‘I am about to fall,’ said the pastor, looking unsteadily about him, reaching for *Ariel*’s arm again.

‘I can’t support you for ever,’ said *Ariel*, ‘have you no family of your own?’

‘Let me take your arm until we reach the lift,’ said the pastor, ‘then someone else will take over from you, and you can do what you like with your hands.’

‘It’s a hard thing to have to do, to take the support of someone who is a stranger, but that’s the

necessity, and, no matter how strong you are when you set off – and I was strong – you can't fight against necessity and win.'

They had reached the lift-shaft; the pastor summoned the lift and leaned against the railings, grasping *Ariel's* upper arm again, even more tightly than before. The lift arrived; *Ariel* opened the doors, assisted the pastor in and onto the bentwood chair which stood in a corner of the cage; *Ariel* stood outside the cage, looking in, about to pull the lift-gates shut.

'You don't need to come up with me,' said the pastor, standing up again, 'but, before you go, tell me where you are going. Could you have climbed the stone wall by the railway bridge?'

'Easily,' said *Ariel*, still holding the lift-gates apart.

'And where would you have gone from there?'

Ariel wished to equivocate. What place shall I say? What do I have in mind? What would cause me to stop? What would I recognize as being the place that might become my home. 'I'm going on,' said *Ariel*. He let the lift-gates go, and placed his hands together in front of his body, but there was nothing supplicatory about the gesture.

'Where is it you're going?'

I am offered always this alternative, as though there were nothing else. You either know or you do not know, they say, that is what they ask: is there no third way? Why does he solicit some abject denial of any knowledge? Would I take a single step if it were unknown to me? Or should I affirm that which I do not know? 'Do you know the hills?' he asked, remembering something of the tall man.

'Oh, those,' said the pastor, not bothering to look out of the door towards them, where they lay as though above the clouds far along the line of the railway. 'I've seen them: if that's where you are going, then there must be a certainty in your mind and you must know where you are going to the final step. I know you better than you think, *Ariel* — if that is your real name: you do not bother to hide much of yourself, you do not bother to conceal what you think you are in the cloudy fog of person, and there is no need for us to talk further. You say that you are going to the hills, a direct course, and that is then the end of it. Our talk, our meeting, is at an end.'

He turned his back on *Ariel*, who was still looking out of the open door towards the hills: the darkness of the room and the solid outline of the open door emphasised the shape and colour of the distant hills, which seemed to float above the haze, as clouds might: one was astonished that their shapes underwent no change, that the same peaks remained before the eye for hour after hour and day after day. Sometimes *Ariel* asked himself: are they hills or are they clouds? Or are they clouds which mantle unseen hills? *Ariel* thought to himself, *Am I going there?* or did I use the words to stand for distance itself, form unknown?

The pastor had his back to *Ariel*: he stood in the centre of the lift cage, ignoring the chair in the corner; now that he had relinquished *Ariel's* arm his strength seemed to be returning; perhaps, in holding the young man's arm he had begun to doubt himself and to doubt the power of his own arm; now he was closing the lift doors, an action which hardly seemed to require any effort on his part; he reached out his arm and seemed just to touch the metal of the handle and the doors began to slide together; he looked over his shoulder at the young man.

Ariel was suddenly aware that the lift doors were about to close. He took a pace towards the pastor.

The pastor, seeing him take this pace towards him, paused, leaving the doors open a little. 'Yes? What is it?' Although he had asked a question, his words seemed to demand no more than *Ariel* should get into the lift with him so that they could ascend together: but despite this he continued speaking as if saying good-bye to *Ariel*, a perverse and conscious mixture of intentions and actions. 'If you know where you are going, then that is the beginning,' he said. He held open the gates of the lift-cage. 'I hope everything goes well for you.' *Ariel* was unable to fathom the real purpose behind his words, which, unless they veiled a covert intention, seemed to be so many sentences of form. 'It was only because you seemed uncertain that I brought you back to this building.' He still looked at *Ariel*, unsmilingly. What does he want? thought *Ariel*. 'We can all of us be mistaken,' said the pastor. 'Good

luck to you.’ His voice trembled a little.

Ariel stood hesitantly in the hall. He stared at the pastor, who now began to close the gates of the lift, and who was now about to press a button on the control panel on the wall of the lift-cage.

‘Wait,’ said *Ariel*, his voice urgent.

The pastor immediately took his hand away from the panel and opened the lift doors. ‘Come in,’ he said, as though he were short of breath, ‘come in, at once!’

He pulled *Ariel* into the lift-cage by grasping both his belt and the collar of his coat, and immediately closed the gates and pulled the lever; the lift-cage began to ascend swiftly; soon the hall below was a foreshortened square which receded rapidly as the bars of the open lift shaft sped by. *Ariel* gripped the bars of the lattice of the cage doors.

‘Why did you ask me to wait?’ asked the pastor. ‘And, when I waited, why did you pause?’

Ariel drew down the corners of his mouth and raised his hands to the level of his chest, palms uppermost.

‘That’s a look that really makes me angry! Why don’t you speak?’ The pastor turned to him in a kind of sudden fury. ‘O I can see that you are a traveller — you don’t deceive me in the slightest — you hardly deceive yourself by pointing into hazy distance, unspeaking —

‘You think you temporise, but you begin — in that first step — to deceive yourself, and this you know: which is why you have a temporising word at hand, ready for the thing you do. Let me see what appears, you say, as though you were able to speak to yourself. And then you act as though your actions were innocent. And you deceive yourself and others without a qualm.’

Ariel turned to face him. How may I begin to say one word I feel to be true to him?

‘O you can face me now that I have been driven to use words for which I can’t account, and now that I have lost my poise and am now angry: now it is you face me — how carefully you choose your time!’ said the pastor.

Ariel looked at him in astonishment. ‘What am I to you, that you should have this interest in me?’ said *Ariel*, speaking slowly but with a heartfelt anguish.

‘What are you to me? What are you to another? Don’t you see that I have already given you the benefit of the doubt by saying that in all your actions you temporised? Do I take an interest in who you are, and how you have been made, and where you are going, other than as the man who stands in the cage here before me?’

‘What is the package which you left in the hall?’

‘That package?’ asked *Ariel*, attempting to resume something of his air of uncaring independence, but looking miserably down through the latticework of the lift door.

‘I said that you temporised. Others, more abrupt, might have called you a liar.’

Ariel looked at him, longing for his independence, his face an unhappy mixture of shame and indignation.

‘I see a constant stream of travellers; they find themselves in the town, destitute, desolate, wandering, without purpose, mad. They don’t listen to me. Sometimes they feign a hearing; a cupped hand, a head turned, the ear to the mouth. That’s the appeal to reason for you. Have you seen them? You’ve lived amongst them, known their invented roots and aims — always the hand pointing backwards, over the shoulder, beyond the spine: *disaster!* — and, pushed or drawn, the looking onward: *salvation!* They look into the world as though it were a mirror. Intelligent or stupid they point to a horizon which is empty.’

‘Is it empty?’ asked *Ariel*, astonished, as though he had never asked himself any question about the edge of the day. ‘It’s beautiful, at least in certain lights, mostly those of dawn, and that’s often where I feel myself to be.’

‘The words mean nothing to me; you describe nothing; what you say goes but a single pace beyond you, and with as many meanings as you could wish to find.’ His voice had been raised; now he spoke quietly. ‘Quick to deceive and quick to be deceived: you are young and you don’t know what it is to deceive yourself, though this is what you do at every step. You don’t suffer for it yet, but suffer

you shall.'

Ariel, who had been listening carefully to the pastor's words, put a hand to the lever of the lift, and pushed it away from him, but the cage continued its swift ascent.

The pastor folded his arms. 'It accepts orders only from the hand it knows,' he said.

'I'll go with you, then,' said *Ariel*, 'wherever that must be.'

'We shall ascend together,' said the pastor. 'Quickly, a few questions, the order in which you answer them is of no importance, but you should give yourself to them: sooner or later you'll be asked for those answers which you have come up with: I don't know when you'll be asked your answers, when the lift gates open, perhaps, or, who knows, in a place far from here. Are you a vagrant?'

'No,' said *Ariel*, 'but when the lift stops I shall make it return.'

'By force of mind, I do suppose. If not a vagrant, then what are you? That's the question.'

The lift stopped. Someone outside pulled open the gates of the lift-cage, put in their arms and grasped *Ariel*: simultaneously the pastor pushed him: *Ariel* was held tightly between the arms of two strong men he could not see. 'Who are you?' he asked, his voice echoing in the corridor.

'No-one, in himself,' said the man, speaking to those who restrained *Ariel* rather than to *Ariel* himself: maybe he thought that had asked a rhetorical question of himself. 'Young birds are easily caught with chaff: a simple man could do it.'

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His surroundings were unfamiliar. The corridor was lit by high skylights, and the downfalling light was insufficient to make out the faces of those who held him, though he had the conviction that the same light fell uniquely and nakedly on his face, revealing every expression which he might make, revealing every direction in which he might look. He could not take his eyes from the pastor, who now seemed to be in a very real position of authority, am I to call him a magistrate? asked *Ariel* to himself.

'What is this package?' asked the magistrate, pointing to *Ariel*'s bag, which someone was carrying up the stairs.

'This package?' asked *Ariel*.

'The same,' said the magistrate.

'I must go,' said *Ariel*, for he found the stare of the clerks intolerable. Why were they looking at him so fixedly? Of whom did they remind him? What was there in his nature which should so surely draw their gaze as he was held under the light-shaft among the motes of the dust in the air? What was there about his form which held their sight?

'The stairs are there,' said the magistrate, his voice at the edge of tiredness, as though the man before him did not interest him in the least as a person; he spoke as though talking to not a man but a generality of man. 'At the foot of the stairs the street begins, as you know. And that's where you will be.' He walked towards the dark panelled door, which was disproportionately narrow; its height continued the theme of ascent. He had no need to beckon *Ariel* for the young man was close behind him.

Ariel was pushed into the doorway behind the magistrate. The door was closed behind him. Beyond the high architrave he had expected some familiar place of questioning, not that you would put it in words, the sense which you had in mind, not to go into words, how words work he did not know, oh, one could be voluble enough, as though one were listening to another, the hot afternoon wearing away, someone talking to himself, making some slight inventory of what he saw, or what he owned, or what he had become. Some small scrutiny, for a little, during the light of a brief day. The magistrate sat on the bench beside him, his shoulders touching his own, they sat together, with their elbows resting on their knees, their heads leaning forward, faces downwards, as though in thought, their hands together, their lips touching their knuckles, when one is so, one does not speak distinctly, half imagines the words which some other has said. *Ariel* refused the glass of wine, I don't know what I shall say if I drink it, he said, not that that matters. For a little while he maintained a silence. Two or three of the high windows were broken and pigeons flew in and out, perching on the glazing-bars and then flying

noisily across the room to its gloomy end; they seemed to use the high gilded baldachino above the carved oak judge's chair for their roosts. He looked downwards at the fraying cuffs of the magistrate's jacket. He is like me, but older, he said. We are sitting on the humblest of the benches, he and I. "Would you like to stay in this town?" asked the man. What were the words? The form of a question? Stay here? Did you say that? It was not an echo. Someone said it. "Would you like to remain here? Oh, something could be found, no doubt about it, some employment, somewhere to live, someone with whom to share a life, someone with whom you might pass the summer evenings, in the courtyard, something of a family. I come from there, and I am proud of it, you might say, a forefinger on the map. Would you like to stay here in this town?" asked the man. "Would it mean much to you? It would to many. To many it would mean the earth." The question was surely imagined. *Ariel* lifted his head and looked at the magistrate, who now leaned against his shoulder, breathing hard. A pigeon, seen in outline, perched solidly on the stone transom of a high window and looked down, eyes ringed, head on one side. Their eyes never have any expression, said *Ariel*, not even while they mate. The magistrate leaned heavily against *Ariel*: *Ariel* braced himself against the man; he knew that, were he to stand suddenly, the magistrate would fall from the bench to the floor. Was it the magistrate's weight alone which pressed against his shoulder or was the man exerting a pressure against him? *Ariel* pushed with his shoulder against the man, who immediately began to fall away from *Ariel*, loosely and naturally, but when *Ariel* withdrew the pressure of his weight the man leaned against him once more and began to breathe more heavily than before. This was fatiguing to *Ariel*, who said to him, 'Can you not lean on your own? Can you not support yourself?' The magistrate did not turn to him, but still sat with his back bent, his lips pressed against the knuckles of his interwoven fingers. "Do you wish to remain in this town?" he said. From the sound of his voice one would have said that he was biting his knuckles.

'Is this one of the questions which they said would be put to me, and an answer to which I should have? Or is it chaff?' *Ariel* hardly raised his voice, but looked across the room, to the further wall, on which there hung a mirror of bright plate-glass, perhaps polished only that morning, in which both himself and the magistrate were reflected, himself beneath the window and the magistrate in near darkness, his face invisible so deeply was it inclined. *Ariel* looked at the reflection with a kind of dread, about to say something, but he paused; he began to speak again. 'Could I stay here?'

'Are you thinking of what you say before you speak?' asked the magistrate indistinctly. Close in front of them was a desk or table whose surface was completely empty. The leather with which its surface was covered was faultless and unscored; nothing of any weight had ever rested upon it. *Ariel* reached out a hand and placed his forefinger on the surface, which was dusty. He began answering the questions by writing with his forefinger in the dust. He looked across the room and saw his image also writing in the dust, with its left hand. He had not known his fingers were so long. The magistrate did not watch what he was doing, but still sat, his head ever lower, closer to his hands. Then he reached up and placed his hand on the surface of the desk and wrote with his own finger in the dust. 'Why does he copy me?' asked *Ariel*. 'Were the other travellers anything but false with you?' the magistrate asked, in a hollow voice, his finger drawing in the dust, a clear dot, and a question-mark.

'No,' said *Ariel*, as the magistrate at last rested his head in his hands, equably listening to the single word, which might have been the answer or equally well have been a refusal to give an answer. 'Did you ever hear anything that was not a superstition?' 'No,' said *Ariel*, tracing his answer in the dust of the table's top.

'Who gives them food? Who gives them winter shelter? Who buries them when they die? Oh, I don't contradict myself. They are only too willing to come down when they are starving, but many of them would rather die up there than leave the track and come down.' The magistrate looked down at the floor through the spaces between his fingers. 'Hunger and superstition drive in contrary ways.'

Shall I stay here or shall I go,' said *Ariel*; the hour and the day seemed immovable, all that had occurred in his life seemed to have its origin and end in this fixed place; through the window, high in the wall and itself tall, the clouds were still in the afternoon sky, the evening wind might never rise,

the sun might not descend in the sky; *Ariel* sat, alert now and looking at the patterns in the dust in front of him, the magistrate was comfortable in his presence, and was at last asleep, his arms folded, his head lying on *Ariel's* shoulder, a man in many ways no older than he.

VI

The sense of loneliness approached him only when he had exhausted the first eager anticipation of continuing the journey. The way ran ahead, as far as the eye could see, to the obscurity of distance where the hills were remotely outlined; had he never seen them before he would not have known that they were there; he imagined another, in the same place as himself, raising his eyes and looking ahead, with disbelief; those airy heights, insubstantial as cloud-towers, were the masses of the mountains which shaped the shrouds of vapour on their sides; he would have stared, in disbelief, as the wall of the sky drew from itself a form which changed but slowly with the days: he would have stared with mute astonishment. Others might have seen him, and looked at him, not breaking the silence which was his, the moment of perception of the way which lies ahead, brushing the flies away from their lips and faces while he stood motionless, unaware for the moment of the flies which steadied themselves on the streams of sweat upon his face, ready for flight, even on his eyelids, through which he stared: even in the tears in the inward canthus: no words came to him, not even the thought, this is the moment in which the world is changed, this is the time in which I am changed. While all this ran as a swift vision through *Ariel's* mind as he looked upon the far-off ramparts of the mountains, he still walked on, along the tall embankment with the country spread round about him in a haze of heat, along the deep cutting where the sky was a thin and jagged line. Then, exhausted, he stopped, at a place where the land dropped away and a cutting became for a while an embankment and then a bridge of latticed girders. He sat on a boundary-pillar, a cast-iron post like a landlocked bollard, at the narrow sideward limit of the railway, looking eastwards, where the level rays of the sun fell upon the mountains' flanks.

What do you do when you think of nothing, he thought, what goes on in your mind. The sun declines. It is very quiet, he said, very hushed, nothing moves, at this moment, yet something is turning, some weight is pulling, the birds and the wild animals know it, and are quiet, in its movement, the only movement, then the sense of separation from the world dissolves, in the silence, breath itself is stilled, still the eyes look on, see the shapes which now they are accustomed to, which an hour in the past they did not know, nor even knew they lacked, ever are the senses so, more skilled in the making than the fragments of the world which come to them. In the silence he opened his pack and took out the food which he had managed to procure from the kitchens, tell the truth, as he stood in the corridor the door had opened and he had been dragged inside, the food had been forced upon him, how long ago, it seemed miles ago, a different day, not that far distant, she had brought out dishes of cold meats and had sliced off rounds of meat, wrapping them in greased paper, how fresh they smell, he said, not long ago did this occur. She had been wiping down the long preparation tables, returning utensils to cupboards, cutlery to drawers, he remembered each of her few words, and he saw in his mind's eye her searching face, framed with dyed hair. The sun had come through the windows, dappled and moving with the shadows of the trees. He recalled the touch of her hands as she put the food in his pockets. He pulled a piece of salt beef from his pocket and held it in his hands. I could not have stayed, he said, it would have been the death of me, I do not like the taste of salt meat. Leave it by the boundary post, in its shade, for someone else. They'll take it and smell it, it is fresh, someone left it for us, someone we know, perhaps, where are they now, perhaps they are gone. It will last us for days. A day, one day's hunger now accounted for, tomorrow is another of them. The hills; of them you might make nothing, a bank of cloud, perhaps, but you remember something of what you saw of them, on a distant day, an early and a heavy frost, that's what stands for them, recall that and they are in front of you, perhaps, how the mind arranges the islands in the night-dark ocean, but for all you know you might have thought you travelled dry-shod on land. It is hardly the time for continuing a journey, but I shall go on, away from the setting sun, tomorrow it will be within my eyes, I can take my life by watching the passing stones where the feet of travellers have worn away the grass, not worn it away, never has it grown, from one step to the last, always these little stones. Do their patterns mean something? As he walked, he watched the forms and shapes made by the little stones, they are not preor-

dained, as is the track, he said, that's enough, that's freewill for you, within a narrow compass, back, oh, maybe a mile, there the ashes of a dead fire, a mile, no more, someone is ahead of me. So closely had he been examining the bed of the track that he was unaware of another's presence until they were nearly abreast.

'— I thought I was alone,' said *Ariel*, looking at the traveller and seeing the tall man, and seeing also that he himself had not been recognized; the tall man stared ahead, his gaze resting on that shifting area of the track, about twelve feet in front of his body. *Ariel* walked alongside him, saying nothing. The evening deepened.

Suddenly the tall man stopped, turned to look at *Ariel*, briefly, not astonished that someone else stood beside him, still not recognizing *Ariel*, taking him for granted, as though he had never gone, looking away again, into the distance.

'You remember me!' *Ariel* ran in front of him, trying to intercept his gaze. 'What are you looking at?'

The tall man expressionlessly stared past *Ariel*. His arms hung loosely by his sides.

'What are you looking at?'

'What do you wish me to say?' asked the tall man. 'What is there I can say?' He looked down at his own hands as though amazed by them, or perhaps by their emptiness; he seemed to have shrunk; his coat sleeves came well down his arms and his thumbs were all but hidden. 'I have been through it, I have, a journey enough, in itself, one undertakes it again and again. Here is the beginning, I say, when it starts.'

'You've been through it, have you? In what way?' *Ariel* knelt down and began to open his pack. The tall man stood beside him, at the edge of his vision, a thick line of dirt down the edge of his suit. 'Are you hungry?'

'Am I hungry! Not since his death,' said the tall man, 'I shall die myself from want of food.' He eyed *Ariel*'s pack. 'What have you got there?'

Ariel took a step backwards and allowed the tall man to examine the food he had been given by the woman as though it were not his. The tall man's hands pried into each of the pockets. 'I can't help it,' he said, putting something to his mouth, 'forgive me, I can't help it,' his mouth full of food, he could not get it into his mouth fast enough. *Ariel* saw him as no more than a sharp-edged outline against the northern sky. Intense and driven, said *Ariel*, standing with his arms folded one across the other, do I mean a judgement in what I say? I do not know. He followed the actions of the thin man with his frank gaze.

'What is the matter? Where are you going?' asked the thin man.

'I'm going nowhere for the moment,' said *Ariel*.

'You looked as if you were about to go,' said the tall man, torn between examining *Ariel*'s pack and keeping *Ariel* close to him.

'No, I took a step back,' said *Ariel*. 'No more than that.'

'How many hours of light are left?' said the tall man, straightening again, shouting the question again, perhaps out of guilt after eating *Ariel*'s food, 'how many hours of light?'

'Three,' said *Ariel*. 'No more.'

'Then we might make twelve miles,' said the tall man.

Ariel shouldered his pack, and they began to walk, their pace slow at first, as though they did not know where they were going, then, falling into the familiar rhythm, the familiar pattern, they gained speed, falling into the grain of the pace, how quickly you can walk when you know the place and know where you are going, said *Ariel*, to himself, with a smile, watching his own shadow which was cast yards ahead of himself, head, hair, profuse but cropped, neck and shoulders, upper arms, torso, thighs, legs, feet, all lengthened and all in motion, unusual to see oneself so, cast for a moment upon the grass, outlined in red, growing longer and less recognizable in its outreach, hardly to the horizon, some moving thing far away, the miles pass, another mile and it will be nearly dark.

The day was at its latter edge.

‘How can I go on when I do not know where he is?’ said the tall man, suddenly, speaking for the first time in six miles, different ground, different country, a change in the colour of the earth. ‘The country changes, but sometimes it feels that he is always with me.’

‘He thought a lot of you,’ said *Ariel*, who, looking ahead at the orange light which lay across the tops of the tussocks of the grass and the western faces of the fence-posts which marked the railway’s boundary, and looking down at his own shadow which lay elongated across a wheat-field, wondered whether his words and his shadow were connected, and, if so, by what.

‘He always exaggerated things, small things, which meant nothing beyond the hour in which they occurred.’

‘I do that,’ said *Ariel*.

‘Not as he did,’ said the tall man, ‘he believed what he was saying, half invented, half remembered.’ He paused in his speaking, perhaps, like *Ariel*, he was looking at *Ariel*’s shadow. ‘What did they tell you in the town back there?’

‘I don’t know exactly,’ said *Ariel*, remembering the cart which carried the body of the little man fording the deep shadow of the railway arch, and the row of men and youths who he did not know, sitting on the cart’s tail-board and swaying as one as the cart took the roughnesses of the road, their legs dangling, passing into the sunlit silence beyond the shadow. For the first time *Ariel* saw that he had remembered the event as he had first seen it, and as vividly. ‘They would have buried him on the day he died,’ he said, ‘that’s the best way, I would think. I met the man who took the service. He was an observant man, I would say. It was by his word they gave us this food. I think it would have been through him.’ He paused. ‘Where are we going?’

The tall man looked at *Ariel* as they walked, as if he were a bright boy who had asked a question to which there is no answer, but who, by asking it, has broken the tenuous connection between person and enquiry, oh, I wouldn’t know how consciously, and who says, in seeing this, “there’s the answer” and who then waits, mouth half-open, for a reply which he knows can make no sense; *Ariel* had his mouth half open, now —

‘Why do you suddenly ask that again?’ asked the tall man.

‘Well, you think you know the answers to these things,’ said *Ariel*, ‘just as I thought I knew the answers to these things when I was young, and when I was no longer free the answers changed, and, when I saw the cart with Short on it, well, they changed again. Maybe the question changed, but I can’t remember any change in that. And I thought I knew where I was going, but, while I was standing in a room in that town, looking out, at the line of the railway and hills, I thought, what am I looking at? Oh, I knew it well, some approximation of a question came to mind, and I thought, there’s no answer to it.’

‘Did they tell you that you were going nowhere and that you were following an illusion?’

Ariel opened his eyes more widely. His face was in shadow. A light wind had risen and ruffled his hair. Suddenly he laughed. ‘Not as strongly as I thought they might,’ he said.

‘There’s no illusion to the place where we are going,’ said the tall man. ‘Do you see the hills?’

‘Yes, and clear they are, too.’

‘Well, what more can I say? You’ve listened to what they say about them, all along the railway?’

‘Yes, through you, mostly.’

‘Believe me, they are true in the body of their substance. Or else, why should men and women who know nothing of each other tell stories which have so much in common? So much they have in common that, no matter what the dialect, broad and slow, or city-sharp, you know their meaning even if the tongue is foreign to you?’ he said, looking at *Ariel*, they saying, as if to challenge him, ‘is that not true?’

‘That’s the common ground, on which we stand, and it’s that which made them, true enough, that’s where we are got,’ said *Ariel*, following the lightnesses and the darknesses which maybe in another place represented the sinuosities of distant valleys. ‘But — ’

They were silent, both looking onwards, their shadows radiating from them. Now even the smallest stick or blade of grass cast a lengthy shadow on the red earth.

‘What?’ said the tall man.

‘But that does not make them true.’

The tall man looked down at the ground, knelt, picked up a stone from its sun-dial shadow; it lay in the palm of his hand, a small pale flint which shone in the sun, edges still sharp, faces still glassy, he turned his hand and let it fall; it met the earth with a brief click; its shadow, altered, stretched away. ‘How many have held that?’ he said.

I should not have said they might not be true, *Ariel* said to himself. Sometimes I should restrain my tongue. I have touched some deep thing in him. There is the one worst flaw, within us all, said *Ariel*, to himself, one flaw, and that’s all, but its shadow is enough to break us. I should have said nothing. Now he’ll prise at it all night.

*

They sat in the darkness, eating, the fire between them was low and red. ‘You’ll do better than any of us here,’ said the tall man, ‘better than myself, better than Short, even. He had a feel for the way of things, that one, and rarely wrong. But that is him; he would never have grown old.’ The night-noises came up to them from the fields beneath them. ‘What was the town like?’ asked the tall man. ‘I watched for a while.’

‘You didn’t watch for long,’ said *Ariel*.

‘I didn’t watch for long,’ said the tall man. ‘But that is that, Short was finished; you can’t always be looking backwards. What was the town like?’

Ariel kept his silence.

‘Well? Did the beak live up to his reputation?’

Ariel shrugged his shoulders after a while. ‘What was his reputation? Tell me that, and I’ll say what I found.’

‘He is said to be — ’ He searched for the word. ‘You hear so many stories,’ he said, ‘but he’s notorious and his reputation goes before him.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Subtle, quick at finding out about a person, you couldn’t pass yourself off as some figure you were not.’

‘And?’

‘He is said to know your origin by listening to a fragment of a single word.’

Ariel said, ‘I’m astonished; both are true. He listens to your words as though he went before them, in the place where they are made and before the breath is taken.’

‘Does he not try to persuade you to stay?’ asked the tall man.

‘I wanted to stay.’

‘Why were you not persuaded by him?’

‘He did his best to persuade me not to stay,’ said *Ariel*, ‘how pitiful a place is this, he said, it would be the death of you, however old you were.’

‘Did he fix you with his eye and tell you that he spoke the truth?’ asked the tall man.

Ariel considered this. ‘He avoided your eye, feelingly, looking down at his own hands, often. He said his words were no more than superstitions, like another’s.’

They sat, looking out into the night. From far away there seemed to be the sound of an ocean, though it was no more than the wind in a belt of trees, poplars, planted at the railway’s edge, as though it were a road, the trees unseen, shadows cast upon the field of stars, the long perspective going on.

The tall man began to speak again. ‘I expect he would use the word “vagrant” where we would use the word “traveller”.’

Ariel paused before speaking.

‘It doesn’t need much thought,’ said the tall man.

‘No,’ said *Ariel*. ‘It doesn’t need much thought.’ He rested his elbows on his knees and looked down; the track was like a shadow which he straddled and which ran between his legs. With his eyes he followed it into distance. ‘Traveller. Vagrant. Journeyer. I don’t know how I would describe myself,’ he said, ‘there is no word that I would take, Oh, for a little while, something might hold true, for a little while, the next day you wake, and the word you think would stand for the person which you are, that word has gone, no word comes to mind, others, no, not to the reduction of a word.’

‘It’s easy to see that you have been listening to the kind of talk which goes before those travellers that leave the railway and who for one reason or another go down to the town; it’s easy to see. And what’s my view? Would you listen to me?’

‘I’m willing to listen to you,’ said *Ariel*, looking up at the outline of his face, half seen against the faint and nebulous horizon.

‘When you have been here, call it anything you have in mind, on the road, travelling, anything, leaving or returning, you become used to persuasion. And, later on, they threaten you. That’s not a use of words.’

‘Is it not,’ said *Ariel*, unquestioningly.

‘They put you in a category with others who you would not recognize, and call you vagrant. Perhaps we are vagrants. It makes no difference to the journey, a word, sometimes we are drawn together. What is the reason for my beginning in this way?’

‘What of my own?’

‘It’s not an illness, or everyone would have a name which went with them, but the day and place when my journeying began comes back to me, how it comes back. A fit. An epileptic fit. Short knew, he had never been there, but he knew, as my family never knew, they don’t come pat to order, the fits and states of mind, what I do I sometimes think I know, as though it were another whose behaviour one cannot control, lack of self-control comes easily, ungracing to the person, standing underneath the portico of that great house which I had called home, the day of a funeral, cold sky, the time of year it seems to me belated winter, should have been a spring, perhaps the spring was soon to come, blue-grey sky, a leaden look about it, accommodates itself to the colour of the mind. The mansion was still. I was dressing in that dark suit, which Adam had pressed and brought to me. “I cannot go on, Adam,” I said. “what shall I say to them?” he asked, quietly observing me, as was his manner. “I cannot go on, I cannot stay,” I said. He repeated, apologising for his repetitions of his own words, as he used to do, “what am I to say to them?” he said again, “I am sorry I repeat myself.” “Do not worry over that,” I said, sitting in the oak backed chair, elbows on the sill, looking out over the park and beyond the coverts and beyond, again, the fields of the home farm, looking out at the drive leading to the church, where a half-muffled bell was tolling, shadow following the substance.

“Adam, you may leave me,” I said, “I shall wear no clothes again. Naked as the hour wherein I was born, that dreadful time, so dire that no-one lives who bears its memory,” I said. “I see,” he said. Then I was quiet, he wondered whether he should quietly leave and close the door and turn the key on me. Adam left the room. My half-sister was outside, in the hall, I heard her footsteps, heard her breathing as she stooped down to the key-hole, I could imagine her big breasts hanging out of her dress as she stooped, I heard the rattle of the escutcheon, if that is what it is, the key-plate. “is it migraine?” words pointless and for my benefit; I could hear the echo from the panelling, and then the beating of the clock, each second and a quarter, my hearing is acute but I did not wish to listen.

“what shall we do?” said Adam. As I say, she said, she was pulling at her dress, lifting back her breasts, one by one, unembarrassed, “Adam, you must lock the door.” “I do not wish to turn the key on him,” said Adam. He could not bring himself to say, <I do not wish to imprison him.> ‘It is for the best,’ she said. “I would rather not,” he said, “he will not forget.” I do not forget. “Do as I say, Adam,” she said. “No,” he said. “Then give me the key, instantly, and expect your notice, Adam.” I did not forget. The unseen wind fanned all my limbs, going inwards, to the centre, as though there were a centre, that’s the thing, it leads you to imagine that there is a centre where you know that there is none.

I could not bear the weight, the feel of clothes. And then the key was turned.

‘I remember nothing for a while.

“Here is a blanket, put it on your shoulders, come here, let me lead you, I have lit a fire in this hut, the roof’s half gone, you act blind and senses gone: it seems you do not know your way,” he said. He was a little man in an old coat with fur trimmings. It is your way for you alone, and I take mine, my way, at last, the first word that was said, which I took upon myself, a way for me, standing in the shelter, through the window the long perspective of the railway, somewhere near the point, comes immeasurable end. People were in the distance, not the far distance, they were to be distinguished, one from another, just, I could have counted them, as they walked away, with their dogs, something in them which I seemed to know, but not for long, often have I wondered who they were: overgrown the sight and the long perspective line. I think they were my family, walking away from me, with their dogs.

“You have shit yourself as one who has eaten nothing,” said the little man, breaking into my thoughts, “the scant shit of an empty gut. Not far from here there is a stream.” “I am sorry,” I said. “No need,” he said, “what is the purpose in that distant bell?” he asked, his head cocked, ear listening at the window. “In its tolling it has a ghostly shadow-self,” he said. “It is half-muffled for a funeral,” I said. Day and night, sun and shadow,” he said. “You convulsed.” He spoke upon the stopping of the bell, seeing the life back into me. “I have seen it before,” he said, “Convulsions. My name is Short.” He did not say his name, no-one ever does, but that was what he came to be.’

Ariel was pondering and weighing in his mind the tall man’s family. ‘That was the last you saw of them,’ he said, ‘walking away from you and into distance,’ thinking, how much of this is true. Enough, perhaps, it tells how they came together, reasonably enough. He’s told it many times before. Can I picture it in my mind? Yes, as easily as though it were a play. I don’t think in words; rarely do I think in words. Listen to the night-sounds. A wind will soon arise. Even this little fire has a voice. He doesn’t mind how his story’s taken. That’s as well. I’m tired, so tired that I can feel the earth and the path move under me as though I sat upon the tail-board of a moving cart and passing on the moment into shadow.

VII

Always the point perspective, the true horizon, the onward way. Who would have thought so straight a way so full? These were the thoughts that came from nowhere, led to nowhere, that he knew, they came: they stood for a little on the colour of their time, and then they went, dispersed. The old man with his back to the screen of bushes, the small fire in front of him: his thought poetic. Take what comes, the days were begun with expectation, now they are begun with I do not know what, no ill feeling about them, but no longer do I expect.

Days, seen from the side are thin as leaves.
The mind retrieves the unresolved alone.
Days fall finished, sink beneath the waves of grass absolved.
Days pass.

I don't know how old I am. Months pass as days once passed. The days flicker as shuffled cards. I have been making my way along this track for so many years I forget when I started. Many would think it curious, but it does become a life. How many years? Is it measured in time? How many winters? They seem to run together, as though a life were a balance, winters in one pan and summers in the other, the equinoxes are about the fulcrum. Where are we now? Somewhere walking downwards. Once I stayed in a stone hut for a year, one complete year, from one blackthorn blossoming to the next. Is one year different from another? They see that I am old, and they ask me, does the railway have an end, indeed it does, it must, I say, it seems to us it has no end, they say, if that is how you see it, why, you may well be right, but you have years on your side, they say, no, they are against me now, they are on yours, I say.

From one blackthorn blossoming to the next. One year. I don't regret it. Oh, many times I have I regretted it, in the past, saying, folly, or some such word, it is a silly thing to have done, with every night you stayed the more deeply you drifted, in thought, to your old home. When I was there, I thought, gather what you have together, today you go. No, I said, give me another day. No excuses, not even to myself, I thought, today you go, it must be today, gather what you have, leave what you do not need, while you are still young.

When did you start travelling? That is what they ask, and the answer is, I do not know. I do not understand the metamorphosis of worlds, I do not dwell upon the metamorphosis of persons, it was the moving lines of steam, they drew me, through a field of umbellifers, this season's new and green amongst the grey pillars of the old, I didn't know their names, which now I know, hemlock, sweet cicely, at the edge to look down over a great city, a life away now, the stair led to the signal-box, high up, high above the viaduct, which was high above the city, no doubt the stonework still remains, the signalman looked down at me, "you allow them to pass," I said, "with these levers," he said, "and when I retire I shall buy a house there —" he pointed downwards at the outskirts of the city, miles away, "and have an allotment there —" he pointed again, to a field closer at hand. "I do not understand you," I said, "after all, you are the highest of all things here." "And the most alone," he said, "save for the language of the semaphore and telegraph." "The city is spread out before you like a map," I said. "I've watched it grow," he said, "taking in the valleys and the downs." He would sit and look at me, half amused, at the signs of awe which invariably overcame a stranger to that height. The steps ran down in a long zigzag. "We work by codes," he said, "young traveller."

Then the travellers used to walk along the platelayers' track, illegally, you could be fined, no money, two days' hard labour in lieu of forty shillings, but some of them would like you with them, to alleviate their loneliness, to talk to you, to have you talk to them, "is there a world beyond the railway?" one would ask of oneself, "an employee's world is not a traveller's." You would take a small present, a few eggs that you'd found, a nicely cut ash-stick, a bundle of firewood for the stove, something like that, they'd allow you to brew up on their stoves in winter, and warm yourself, "I'm sorry if

I smell,” “don’t apologize, you don’t smell,” “I have a keen sense of smell and your hut smells of lamp-oil, coal-smoke, the tobacco that you smoke, the vague smell of electricity, it makes me think of my childhood and the immortal old men who now no longer are.” The night is behind you and I recognize your profile somehow. Solitude makes men strange, and women too, I think more and more of childhood, now that I am further from the shore, the isles of thought were close to continents perhaps, the seas are empty now and the wind arises. “Tell me poetry,” the signalman would say, “I am listening but if I keep my sentience upon the bell and in waiting for its sound you will understand.”

Days seen from the side are thin as leaves;
The mind retrieves the unresolved alone;
Days fall finished, sink beneath the grass absolved.
Days pass.

You would hear nothing but the flow of the night-air in the telegraph wires, from parish to parish, post to post, age to age. He would tap out his pipe on the stove, take off the lid, sweep the ash into the fire, “my shift ends at six,” he said, “you must go before then, sleep below, if you wish.” I went down to the lower floor, the room where the mechanisms were. A better place to sleep than a culvert, or on the stones beneath a bridge. Half sleep, the owl’s soft night flight, the man awake pacing the boards above, long intervals, the mind would search as far along as it was possible to go, the thread of thought, the line, and in half-sleep the sliding of the signal, the interlocking falling into place, the tang of the incoming code upon the cup of brass, then, far, as though from the beginning, the first intimation of the distant train.

*

She, on the verge of her menarche, turns in her sleep, her eyes open, the drowsy night, the open casement, the full moon’s light upon the bed, upon the boards’ perspectives, upon the cold and breath-blown candle in the china holder. Outside, the moths whirr round the blossoms of the beans. What wakened me? I hear no sound. Will the person that I am undergo no change? She looks out at the night, on the moonlit garden, the shadows of the trees beyond the orchard gate, the night stirrings in the hen-house, night sounds, the goat pulling at the running chain, briefly, the links drawn tight, then slackening, her ears attentive, as though she knew that she was watched, the quick pause of the moving jaw, wise irony of the goat’s lips, wise irony of the moonlit eyes.

In the house she lies wakeful in her bed, I know my own mortality, the old are calm in the face of death, we all learn this. She listens; in the silence, nothing, and then the sound of the midnight train upon the viaduct, and its echo in the hills. I will be asleep before the sound is distant once again and the silence falls.

*

Ariel sat across the fire from the old man.

‘Do you know my city?’ he asked. ‘It was the terminus.’

‘It was the terminus, you say?’ The old man seemed to shrink as he pulled his arms together, lowered his head a little. ‘In your day perhaps. Then it was a terminus.’ He spoke gently. ‘But I come from far beyond. . .’

Ariel did not know why the thought should fill him with so sudden a fear: he looked across at the old man, wondering how much of this sudden fear he had given out, but the old man sat unchanged with his eyes closed, the firelight on the wide blankness of the upper lids, his face down-turned.

Why a sudden fear?

Let me think it through. I have for the last day or two entertained the perturbing notion that

maybe my own origin was never a starting-place. Now I know it to be true. It runs as far backwards as it does forwards. The beginning and the end are both unknown. All my questions on the problem do nothing but show me how afraid I am.

Ariel looked at the old man. He looked at the aged face: the old mouth was still muttering, one could not hear what he said, his language had changed, 'tell me,' said *Ariel*, 'where the terminus is.'

The old man opened his eyes. He stood up, with care, as one whose hips are hurt by sudden movement; he felt around the boundaries of pain; he grasped a stick of ash, polished in the thick and mired in the thin, unferruled, no initials carved upon it, as he stood he was seen to be of greater age, his coat hung from his shoulders' bones.

'Where does the railway start?' *Ariel* asked the question, Oh, he will not answer it. Only when you are like him will you know the answer because it means not one thing, will not be told.

'Keep the fire, if you like,' said the old man. 'There's a bit of wood behind the hut. I thought to stay here, but now I must move. This morning you go, I said, gather what you have, leave what you do not want, and go. The place is no possession to be kept. Or you will never go. The day passed while I turned them over, the thoughts. None of them possessions to be kept. They came intricate to my mind, the ways of them, the hours. None of them possessions to be kept. This night you go, I said.'

And then, with a slowness during which the darkness deepened, he made his slow way down the track, towards the distant hills.

VIII

The tall man in the ragged suit returned to the place where he had left the young traveller. *Ariel* was not there. The tall man stood in silence, his hands by his sides, his feet together, on the steep hillside, in the abrupt transition from cutting to embankment. The place was empty, as though no-one had been there that day; all the daylight hours devoid of humanity. On the hillside was a high stand of ash trees, through which the sunlight fell. Was it here that I left him? said the tall man: I do not know. The place comes back to me. But often I know places I have never seen before. Similarities of planes, borne on the plain beneath the senses' sky, perhaps. Was it night? I recall it being night, moonless, Pleiades hanging over the ash-grove, the seven stars, seen amongst the clear tracts between the trees. Seven, they say. Seven clear to the sight, all around them there are hundreds, close around them, you are aware of them, but they are not clear to the sight. Not to mine. It was night I left him. Am I able to forget *Ariel* as easily as I forgot the little man? Oh, not easily; they all come back, they all of them come back, often; *Ariel*, the little man, and those unknown, seen fleetingly, some small part of them distinct, in the briefest time; the tall, gaunt woman with a long, firm stride; and those, unknown also, seen for days but never clearly, the figures extended in the distance, on the way, which I hurry to reach on the first intimation of the end of day, out of loneliness, perhaps, or some reason similar, but they are extended in the distance, as I say, however fast I walked they are still ahead, until taken by the failing light, swallowed up in night, I would not know: when the moon rose in the sky, there they were again, upon the track, the walking figures, extended in the distance, always in remoteness, never known, not possible, never stood in their nominative right, if that is what one has, it's doubtful, but always walking away. I would ask: does the uncertain figure ahead, at the rim of my knowledge, at the far throw of my senses, does that figure perceive the one in front of him, uncertain? I would ask this, knowing there was no way of knowing. But still I would ask it, not only of myself, but also of any other I might meet. What figure? he would say. On the horizon, I would say, he must have passed by this place an hour ago. He would look at you. Was it myself? he would say, at last, for there was no other. No, this figure would not be as distinct as you. No other words; he would turn away, I would turn away. What a valediction: a turning away, he to his state, I to mine. What was his state, I did not know, but his figure was not indistinct. Was my figure indistinct to one who followed me? Sometimes I turned round, and saw no-one. Sometimes, on the nightfall's premonition, I would turn, face the past, see a figure walking away: sometimes a little man in an old coat: sometimes a tall, gaunt woman with a skirt tattered in the hem, her long hair unbrushed and uncared for, her hands as big as a man's. They are walking away from me in all directions, I would say. I paused. I am at the centre. I paused again. No. This is the illusion of the senses. Were they walking away from each other, I amongst them, the illusion of the centre would be everywhere. At nightfall one's vision draws close, horizons narrow down, avenues of time shut down like senses. I looked no more behind. I was afraid that I should not be able to tell time past from time to come. When you wake in the morning he has risen and is on his way. An idea of oneself, maybe. Do I know myself? You don't want to work yourself into a corner. Did I know Short? Not as well as *Ariel* knew Short. Sometimes I confused Short with Adam. Did I know *Ariel*? Not well. I don't understand him as well as I might. Do I know this place? I would say not. Have I been here before? I don't think so. Does *Ariel* know this place? Only he would know that; perhaps not even he. I could describe it to him and he might not know it. Who is the tall, gaunt woman whose name I never knew? She had been so companionable in her way. She held a powerful registration of her journey. Then she left one stormy night. Where is she now? I can see her in my mind's eyes, striding into distance. No longer do I look so far ahead. My gaze seems to rest, my sight seems to rest, the centre of my balance rests, upon a point some way beyond myself, into which I seem to fall.

By the side of an overgrown crossing was a barn, built of brick, clay tiled roof half-gone, difficult to make out in the failing light. A moon had risen, and gleamed through the rafters where the tiles were gone. The track goes onward under the moonlight. A strong recollection, no forewarning. Of a night when I was twelve, night, a well by the bend in the lane, near home, capped with stone, the wa-

ters falling from a lip into the stones. He stood in silence, feeling the place in thought. *Ariel* is near me, he said, to himself.

Ariel, leaning against the wall, had seen the tall figure far off, the long stride recognized, but he had been content to remain here, and to keep his silence, and to allow the tall man to continue. What is he looking at? asked *Ariel* as the tall man paused, not far from him, and then began his walk again, without longsight other than the narrowness a little way before his eyes. I can call him, I can keep silent, said *Ariel*, to himself. He looked down at his feet. The old man's frugal fire was long extinct, its very ashes dispersed by the wind.

The tall man put his hands to his head. *Ariel* could see his angular profile very clearly. I am myself unseen, he said, he thinks he is alone.

This is a satisfactory place to pass the night, the shadow of that wall, said the tall man, I am alone. But the fact that being alone comes to my mind means that I sense the presence of another. In the distance, perhaps, walking away, whatever the direction. I do not know who they are.

Ariel heard the man sit down, arrange his few possessions behind himself, heard his slow breathing, heard him sigh. He saw the figure stretch out its hands, fingers spread apart. But the two hands, pale in the moonlight, merely clasped themselves together, and then clasped themselves round an unseen knee. The half-seen man lowered his brow.

There's something dreadful in him, said *Ariel*, I can't keep in his company for long, he gains his energy from those who travel with him, alone he's nothing, you would have to carry him and what he thinks he owns, he makes a place before he's seen it with his eyes, he covers the miles with talk. *Ariel* stood in silence. Can I feel so strongly about another man who needs my help? How cool the night is; beyond the barn there's a broad wheat-field, I can't see over the brow, the land is curved beneath the moon, gentle curves, like a woman's sleeping body. Soon it will rain. They think that, because I don't say much, they can convince me, of what, oh, that all depends on them.

Ariel walked from the shadow of the barn onto the line. He was looking down the long perspective beneath the moon, but he saw that, on hearing the first step, the first sound of the flints of the bal-last of the track, the tall man had turned round, attempting to place him, looking up at his face.

The tall man must have recognized his silhouette, for *Ariel* was outlined against the sky.

'It is you! I had thought you were ahead of me! Many times had I seen you in distance, way beyond me!'

'I've been resting by the wall of that barn,' said *Ariel*, simply, pointing behind himself.

The tall man looked at the almost roofless shell which stood vacantly in the moonlight. 'I swear I had seen you walking on ahead of me, and into distance; no-one walks with anything near your speed. As I say, I seemed to see you far ahead.'

'No, not me. There's a lot to think of: some things can be thought while travelling; others find their way when you are still.'

'There's no reasoning with you,' said the tall man, in a friendly manner, anxious still lest *Ariel* leave him. 'You are very stubborn.'

'I'm not moved easily,' said *Ariel*.

They faced each other in the night without moving.

'You have been talking to someone, I can almost feel their words in your heaviness,' said the tall man.

'Yes,' said *Ariel*, looking to his side, at the wheat-field, where the silent shadows rose and fell upon the contours of the land.

'Oh, you find all the trackside philosophers willing to speak to you at this time of night, it passes the time, for you, for them, firstly they might wish to convince you of what they hold, will it reasonably bear one's weight, what is its precedent. I was kept from my journey for two days by a man who wish to convince me of one small thing.'

They remained together for a while, the tall man sitting down, talking, *Ariel* standing by his side, resting his weight on one leg, not looking down at his companion, but rather at the country which

surrounded them, or away into the distance, where the path met the sky beneath the moonlight. There is no need for words, said *Ariel*, to himself, I haven't got many, I like to do without them, if I can, let what appears wordless speak. As this night does. If you convince me of something which you believe, will it help you? The answer's transmuted, it will help you. Give me something to eat, and I'll tell you. Or a coin, something to eat, something to keep me warm, substance by proxy. You can't warn anyone. It's a decision all must make. You can't even warn by means of a glance. You stand beside the board that forms the counter of a stall. The talker (the stall-holder) and the listener (the would-be customer) have their exchange across it. One wants to convince, the other to be convinced. Such is the need for security. A passion, perhaps. The strongest of them, I think. I think that, for the moment. You see the worthless merchandise, you see it held between the evaluating fingers, as though it were rare, held up against the lamplight that streams away: the very shadows give a greater truth. The inverse square diminishment of light. The holder of the stall apprehends your look, knows you've weighed him, goes before the swift glance of your warning, confidential upon the ear of the man whose face is bound in front of him, a nod in your direction, quick the movement of his eyes: "you pay no regard to him, noble customer: he's a trouble-maker, you see it in his face, why in his finer years he kep' a stall himself." "I want to buy, not to be warned against my buying," the round eyes say, "I'm with you, stall-holder, and that's the world all over." If you start an argument then it's bad for you, a life bound to the wanderer's way, a maker of trouble at the world's edge. And that, said *Ariel*, is how I came to be put away. And that is why I am now a vagabond. I can stare at the reflection of my face in the still water of a ditch, the sky moving fast behind my head, and I can say "*Ariel*: vagabond."

'An old man asked me to sit beside his fire,' said *Ariel*.

The tall man looked up at him. 'There is nothing unusual in that.'

'An old man alone. At the extreme of his life. He had no belongings. He sat before a little fire, looking down, his eyes closed, at one with the sounds of the evening. I made no sound, but he sensed my presence. "You are welcome to a place here, by my fire," he said. He opened his eyes and looked at me only when I was near to him. I offered him a little of my food. "I need little," he said. He ate a morsel of bread, took a little wine. "Thank you," he said. "That was but a token meal; you should have some more." "The taste of bread and wine, that was enough," he said. "No more is needed." The shadows fell slanting on the weathered wall.

'We sat together. I watched the movement of the sun. He closed his eyes.'

Ariel changed his weight from one leg to another; he had not put down his pack; it seemed as if he were about to go upon a word.

'I know the man,' said the tall man.

'Do you?' said *Ariel*. 'Does it matter if you know him?'

'Did he question you, but give you no answers?' asked the tall man.

'A few questions, hardly meant as questions,' said *Ariel*, his thumbs round the straps of his pack, as though he were about to stride off on the instant of saying good-bye.

'Did he talk overmuch about the old days of the railway, when it was running?'

'He did,' said *Ariel*, 'but any old person would do that.'

'I know him, then,' said the tall man, 'he means no harm, he's well known, makes his own pace, so slow that he sees eye to eye with people who were born long after him, knows what they think — young folk like him — to others of his generation he's impossible, but, unless he gets a move on, he'll never get there. He's frail enough as it is. Last winter he was sheltered by a good-hearted band of travellers, the leader of them was called Fritz. They were a family, a curious one, of tumblers and jugglers, a big family, rough, of boys who looked for trouble and of jealously protected girls, O, not that Fritz was his real name, no name says anything of origins, they come and go, I accept this name, for a day, says one. He wore a riding hat, taken, like his name, from a huntsman, a black top-hat, of silk, strange headgear for one condemned to walk his life on foot. It amuses or arouses fear in everyone he meets. But they sheltered the old man as though he were a kinsman. Which perhaps he might have been. Though I think not. But without them he'd now be in a some parish cemetery or another, with a grave

with an cast-iron marker. Nameless, one winter's reddening of rust. Have you seen the vagrants' corner of a parish graveyard? He'll never get there, unless he mends his pace.'

Ariel looked back along the railway. He said nothing. The night hung clear; the little clouds were moving quickly, but here, near the earth, the air was still, a keen sense of the passing of time, movement in silence, you could hear the falling of the drops of dew from the leaves of the roadside ash, from the spikes of the foxgloves which had set seed and died erect.

'I don't suppose he was the same man,' said *Ariel*.

'If he was the man I'm thinking of, you would never have seen him unless he had wished it, you would have passed him by.'

'Perhaps you are right,' said *Ariel*, thinking of how he had been drawn aside, in the late afternoon, listening to the echoes of his own long strides, the sounds of his walking, the free movement of his limbs and spine. 'I paused, and seemed to search for him.'

'He's very shy.' The tall man seemed to have nothing further to say. Sudden he reached into a bag. He pulled out a bottle. He passed it over to *Ariel*. 'Here. Try this. Plum spirit. It'll make you less suspicious of me.'

'I'm not suspicious of you,' said *Ariel*.

'Are you not?'

'No, I'm not suspicious. I don't know whether I want to travel on my own, make up my own mind from the things I see.'

The tall man held out the bottle.

'You can't travel alone,' he said, 'it's not possible. You'd forget the language after a while, and it would mean nothing, and then you would have nothing to keep your thoughts in. You would turn feral.'

Ariel began to laugh, his teeth white in the moonlight. He reached for the bottle.

'As much as you wish,' said the tall man.

'You don't mean that,' said *Ariel*. He took a drink. 'This is strong stuff. Is it local?'

'Yes, but you don't want to know where it comes from; that doesn't affect its quality now. Besides, I owe you something; you've shared your food with me.'

'That hardly matters.'

The tall man took back the bottle and drank from it himself, not wiping the neck on his shirt, in a spirit of friendship. 'It matters a great deal, as you will find out later.' He paused and then began to speak again. The taste of the spirit had made his voice more restful. He was at his ease. *Ariel* took the pack from his back and sat on a quarter-mile post.

'Why that old man is so shy and quiet no-one knows. There are rumours that he has money sewn inside his coat,' said the tall man.

'No, I don't know what it is to be at ease, but he's at ease with nothing,' said *Ariel*. He got down from the quarter-mile post and lay on the ground, on his side, staring up at the moon. 'You said, a moment ago, that he would never get there. What did you mean by that?'

'A figure of speech, you'd use it of someone slow,' said the tall man, 'you'd say, "he'll never get there".'

'But where is "there"?' asked *Ariel*.

'Are you a child? Do you take everything for a certainty?' asked the tall man, 'Do you want another drink?'

'Yes,' said *Ariel*. From where he was lying he could see the flowing country beneath the embankment. 'It is like a sea out there,' he said. He reached for the bottle, holding it up to the moon and looking at the level. 'This is going down.'

'When it's gone we'll mark the mile with the bottle,' said the tall man, 'but we'll never be lost for more.'

'Why are there so many superstitions here?' asked *Ariel*.

'There are so many, you are right, I'd hardly notice them but for someone who thinks as direct

as you: superstitions all around, in your thought and in your speech, be careful of that, you'll say, be careful of what, of that, the shape of that tower in the distance, seen out of the corner of the eye, the shying thing that makes the horse whinny and go sideways, where is it, I do not know, the map has run out, we set off together, one with a map and one with a lamp, and first the lamp-oil went and now the map's edge is in the past, good enough, take the course as it presents itself. Fertile the fields, beyond what is known. Each mile has its dialect of uncertain forms. Talk to the townsfolk, and they don't understand. They lean out over bridges, "where are you going? You won't go far." It makes no sense to give an answer. Nor a retort. Yet, running through all the travellers' speech, there is the jargon of the railway, the railwaymen's slang, one day it'll be yours, Italic, and mine as well, one day the mark of the *bona fide* traveller.

'You can't affect the talk of the past, that's no good, too many fallen stones, the collapse of buildings, the map's edge right enough, he will never get there, one might say, to oneself, on hearing another speak, an old man with a voice like a broken bellows, hardly do the chords meet, in the hollow of his neck, the questions of the future come to him, he evades them, slips among the ruins of the past, a beginning and an end are nothing to him.' He fell silent.

Ariel listening in the dark, the moon waning, thought that he had fallen asleep, but, on hearing him stir and then sit up, he looked away from him and up at the heavens; the stars of Pleiades were shining through the tall boles of the high ash-grove, silent, now, the oxen lying in the grass amongst the straight and silent columns of the trees, the oxen at peace after the long day, heat and flies and dust gone within the past, eyes open, clear the sight, acute the senses, full and live the breath, no sleeping language do they need, to carry burdens of their thoughts.

'Aren't you a trackside philosopher, and don't you use the people you speak to for your support?' said *Ariel*.

'No.' He had been listening to *Ariel's* every word, wide awake. The answer of the single word was directly on the tail of the question. 'I'm telling you the truth. I'll never tell you anything but the truth. It's the others that you need to watch.'

Oh, the days are full of systems, ways of telling futures from the cards, the heavens intervene in the falling of the die, better left uncast. Always, I think, better left uncast. Best never taken in the hand. Hazard a guess at tomorrow. How will it end. Pause, before sleep; who says it ends. Who makes ends from a hand, a mile, a life of ends.

IX

Days and languages: they flow like rivers.

How to make some sense of what I see about me: I never was confined so much as when I made a world from fragmentary sight; I have spent a life in watching, to the beat of an internal drum. They make their way, according to their nature, the old and the enfeebled slowly, pausing often, sometimes they look around themselves, sometimes they are helped by those more able, names and faces never known to them, sometimes they hold one another, for their support, sometimes they pull from the friendly hand the thing they are, I want no help, you will fall, well what of that, I like this place and here shall I stay forever, farewell to you, do you not know who I am, no, never have I looked at you, even while you took my hand within your arm's crook, no, never have I looked at you, not even while you carried me, you will fall, well so be it, you are not a burden to me, do not speak of burdens, I shall remain at the roadside, sight turned inwards, perhaps, it seems so to me, to them the mind might move more freely, eager in the end to leave, perennially young, in that eagerness. He looks raptor-like ahead, watching his helper go, subsumed in distance. I told him I liked this place, he said, anything to get away, and now I'm here, it will have to do. I have spent a life in watching, to the beat of an internal drum. Some go quickly, rapidly, wishing to find what lies ahead, and what does lie ahead, the ruined columns of the past, the roofless tenements. In the long shadows they meet, those who once they knew, old acquaintanceship renewed. I wonder what it must look like to those below. Looking up from the fields to the high embankment they would see the flames of a fire and hear the shouts of those who danced like drunken demons in a night of merriment. In the morning they have gone. They come from the fields and the villages to the boundary wire, to see the track empty to the end of sight, the remains of dead fires. Who are they? Why do they take this way? Is their life the mirror of our own, they think, perhaps: each a wandering prognosticator, each a prophet to his own soul. I do not know. It's better that I sit upon a bank and watch, rocky country this and I live within the adit of a mine which overlooks the railway for miles. No occupation's truthful. Someone now gone was here before me. Someone will come when I am gone. The stone walls are silent in the night and echo to the beat of an internal drum. The names alter as the language changes.

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The break of day, the level light, before the sun is up, the cold air lying in the hollows, the mists lying in the cups within the earth, broadly in the marsh and in the low-lying tracts, the line across the mist-filled places where the water presses down and finds a way, always, as a person does, sometimes hunger takes the stomach, the fast of day's beginning, could I but stop I would take some land and grow the best I could, but of the boundary wall, of that I could not bear the thought, nor carry the thought of a gate, it would weigh too much for me to stand, early morning, the dews are heavy on the stones, collect in the hollows, a spring between the rocks, the water has a voice, whose language does not change, the fall of water anywhere, cool as the earth.

The stone cistern takes the cave-cold spring,
Holds it to a level and lets it free, to flow amongst the stones.
He drinks from his hand. How like a mind a place of waters is.
Brief beneath the sun, unknown the darkness to the past:
Unknown the darkness yet to come.
Time's immeasurable where no senses are.
Though all the world were silent you would hear the stream
That pours from the earth-cold lip;
You would know the voice's tongue and the feel of senses close to yours.
He drinks from his hand: his fingers open and the cool drops fall.

Alone, that way is for the best, now, no disturbance to the thought, equable. In the early sunlight, sun-strength growing by the moment, a figure resigned by a quarter-mile post, emaciated as a corpse, but still looking to its way along the track. You look down, aware of your own breath. Do I trespass in looking at him? Kneel by his side, close my eyes, as his are closed, the world is gone, the spirit in its suppleness departs.

*

She came unhurriedly along the way, riding a grey mule, sidesaddle, in the early morning, a clear-eyed, small-boned woman, no age, but a little older than myself; she wore a neat if dusty riding-habit of dark-grey bombasine and a mid-crowned top-hat with a black crepe band. She paused beside me, looking down at me. She said she liked the look of me. 'You have the look my man would have had when he was young, long before I knew him. I've seen a photograph of him, taken long ago, glowering, rather; a prison photograph. You might have been the man who stared toward the camera's lens. We were close despite the difference in our ages. Just to see you alive and walking in the dawn sunlight astonished me, troubled me. I watched you for some long time. I shall not tell you the story of my life. That I tell no more. Yet as you walk along this path you seem more free within an hour of your life than he within the whole of his. When I saw you I thought: if he's alone, I'll ask this man to go with me, share what I have: I'll divide my days with him.

'But now I see you face to face I know we'd fight; I'd never understand the nature of your freedom. I'll never have a man again unless he is willing to be constrained by me. If I have a man he must be at my beck, so that he can take my bidding. You wouldn't put up with that, young man.'

She looked down at me, smiling. 'Why was he not free? I do not know. "Be free," I said to him, looking at the sweat upon him in the moonlight of the summer's night. "I do not understand you; do you want me gone?" he asked me: "Always I feel a fear at my mind's edge, a presence solid as a shackle, that, were I free, the person of myself would be no more. To be free would be to endure free-fall." I listened to the fountain in the courtyard. A cool oasis of sound in the hot, still desert of the night. I don't want a man again. Not a free man: I would not understand his need for freedom. I'd accept the committed love of a smart but obedient boy.'

She smiled down at me.

'I'll give you a suit of his. I don't know why it has been brought all this way, on a mule's back; perhaps providence dictated it, though I think not. But it will fit you to perfection: if you were to wear it before me at an interview, I'd give you the job, and no mistake.'

'I don't want your husband's clothes,' said *Ariel*.

'You are all in rags, a free young man like you, as you walked I could see your legs and the cheeks of your slim arse (dimples and all) through the rents in the perished cloth, and your shoulder-blades through the torn shirt — you had better take this suit. It is well made.

'He was a man of substance and integrity: when he was free at last I took the road. I'll find another man, I thought, I'll find another life to call my own. Smart, youthful and obedient.

'Wash yourself, first. The suit is quite clean. He died in an accident. A fall from a considerable height.' She raised her thin eyebrows. 'Free-fall.'

She reached a gloved hand into the ticket-pocket of her riding habit. 'Here: here's my card for you to find me, should you ever need my help or my companionship.' She passed down her card to *Ariel*. He read

MRS MIRIAM KIXIL

He looked up at her. 'There's is no address,' said *Ariel*.

Mrs Kixil shrugged her shoulders and looked around herself. She raised her two gloved hands, their palms uppermost. She pulled a most sardonic face with highly raised eyebrows as she looked down at *Ariel*. 'What might I say?' she said.

‘Goodbye, young man.’ Mrs Kixil cued her mule and clicked her tongue upon her palate.

Wet and cold with water, *Ariel* returned from the stream which flowed through the culvert: the woman had left the clothes on a bush.

Mrs Kixil was in the middle-distance, aside the gaunt and patient animal, a graceful woman in a dark habit, beneath the shadows of a high but narrow accommodation-bridge that spanned a deep cutting through living rock, a dark limestone. She was surely little older than *Ariel*. Her eyes were intelligent and careful. You would not recall her, in your mind’s eye, without her being mounted.

She left because she did not want the sight of my wearing it, *Ariel* said to himself, then, more truthfully, she longed to see me wearing it, yet knew that the man she saw could not be obedient to her. Could I be obedient to her? Maybe. Now I’ll never know. She has not once looked back.

What are clothes? Here, a black coat, grey striped trousers, a pair of leather-soled shoes, a formal shirt, a couple of shirts (white: an unhandy colour), a college tie, place and faculty unknown.

I have to wear them, said *Ariel*, my own are falling apart.

As the woman on the mule went, another figure appeared on the horizon behind *Ariel*; *Ariel* turned round to look to his past; the figure was slender and remote, running at great speed, in the early sunlight, keeping, *Ariel* thought, to the centre of the track, *Ariel* stopped in his walking to watch it, this figure, hands over his eyes, it can’t yet be told aside from what it is seen against, he said, because of the foreshortening of the track the figure grows no larger, coming towards *Ariel* or leaving *Ariel*, that’s unknown, perception’s sudden, then the mind’s made up, will not be easily changed, it is a boy, who soon stood silently in front of him, recovering his breath rapidly, as though his running were nothing to him, his energy untaxed.

‘You have nothing on your feet,’ said *Ariel*. ‘You go faster barefoot,’ said the boy, ‘and you make less noise. And you take feelingly the course through which you run.’ ‘Your running hardly taxes you,’ said *Ariel*. ‘I hardly stop, there’s no day nor night in one same place, places fall to the past as though they were days, sometimes I think I run through time, I know the tongue of everyone I meet.’ *Ariel* looked at the boy, whose fair hair was ruffled by the wind. He cannot age, said *Ariel*, to himself. Then he said, ‘Do you know what lies ahead?’ ‘I do,’ said the boy, who had already stood still for longer than it suited him, beginning again to run, he beckoned to *Ariel* with a backward look, as if to say, for a while you’ll keep up with me, will understand me the better while we are on the move, for a while, it will be long enough for what I have to say, and so *Ariel* ran alongside him, ‘I know what lies ahead,’ said the boy, his voice quiet, his running silent, ‘not in words, nor forms, they flow like rivers, not in appearances, like streams, drawn downwards by some great gravity, I understand the day which lies beneath the multiplicity of days, the gravity that underlies the multiplicity of tongues.’ *Ariel* looked towards him. His hair was streaming behind him in the gale of his progress. How old are you? *Ariel* asked the question, but only to himself, it would have been a foolish question, he was born on the railway, anyone could have told you that. ‘You were born on the move,’ *Ariel* said. ‘Yes,’ he said, unsmiling. You wouldn’t begin to question him, said *Ariel*, the words you said would never come to him as questions. No questions from either of us. For some reason a thought came to my mind that has often risen of its own accord, which is, there is no difference between mankind and animals. *Ariel* was able to keep up with him, for a little way. Back within the past while he stood silently I saw the night of his conception in his eyes: now he’ll soon run faster, then I’ll not keep up with him, said *Ariel*. The boy began to run faster. Aside from being barefoot he was lightly clothed. He carried nothing. He knows where everything is, from beginning to end, *Ariel* said, to himself, he sees all round himself, not just through a little gap. He looked at *Ariel*, his expression effortless. Speed and movement apart he might have been silent and at rest. *Ariel* was running faster than he had ever done in his life. But not in haste. There seemed to be no need of effort, no end to hope. ‘Do you see those hills?’ said the boy, reaching out with his right hand as though he could have touched them easily, his breathing equable, drawn to the metre of his pace, ‘something of you rests there: figure, form or place not yet resolved: I shall be with you.’

Ariel stood still, in the middle of the track. His breath came back to him quite easily. *Ariel*

watched him go, a light and soundless figure. When he was half a mile away he turned round, regretfully, *Ariel* thought. He raised his hand. *Ariel* wondered if he would return. That was not possible. He will never pass the same place twice. He turned again, his hand still raised, and he ran on. *Ariel* followed him with his gaze into distance. *Ariel* thought he was out of sight, but, way beyond the point where he had lost him, his form was caught minutely by the dappled light of a tree's shade. Then he was gone. Then he was a figure on the skyline. Then he was gone. *Ariel* thought he saw him again, but it might have been imagination. The line was empty. He was on it, but *Ariel* could no longer see him. Perhaps he, unseen, knew where *Ariel* was, *Ariel* thought. *Ariel* wondered if he had really met him. He had left nothing. Look, there was the imprint of a bare foot, in the mud, underneath a footbridge. All the weight was in the forefoot, in the big toe. *Ariel* could see in his mind's eye the lithe and springing step which had left nothing but its negative.

*

An autumn day, redolent of summer, passing silently towards its end. The hour was already cold. The railway halt stood in what had been a clearing in the woods; there was no more than a stone platform and a low wooden building. Beyond the platform wall the woods fell steeply away. He heaved his pack onto the platform, climbed up. The air was silent. The sun was declining rapidly. Who last waited here for a train? The track stretched away in both directions. How long ago had the boy passed through? What had he made of the place? Was this silent day now within his past?

Ariel stood in silence on the platform. One might imagine that he was waiting for a train, looking out, into distance, his hands resting on his hips, his burden by his side. What is the stance and the expression of someone who waits? Do they know for what they wait? Is it for more than time to pass? Is it an end? Had he known for what he waited, would he still then wait?

I shall spend the night here, said *Ariel*, in waiting. Waiting for what? That I do not know. The morning. And then? The journey taken in hand once more. And then? Does the eventuality never come? There were two rooms in the building, oh, many people must have slept in them, sighed as they came in through the door, another day is over, look around the place, what makes this a room, perhaps that's what passes through the mind, hear the footfall hollow on the wooden floor, look in silence at the ochre woodwork of the boarded walls, the sash window with the cracked glass, in the corner some worn-out piece of clothing, look, a woman's fashionable shoe which has cast its heel. Standing in the middle of the room, easing the burden to the floor, hunger, lightheadedness perhaps, sit for a while, as one who has given over waiting, on the floor, beneath the window. Best look at the other room as well. Best to look at your environs. *Ariel* rose to his feet, left the room to its silence, stood again upon the platform. The shadows were longer, his own ran beyond the platform's edge.

The old man sat silently in the empty cube of the room, his eyes closed, his hands together, resting in his lap, the sunlight fading at the window.

'I know you,' said *Ariel*. 'How have you overtaken me?'

The old man opened his eyes. There was no element of recognition in his face, though he looked out at the room, not especially at *Ariel*, but taking in his face, as part of the plenum of the room, the darkening cube, and then his gaze drifted downwards, in front of his body, as though there were a fire there.

He gave no sign of hearing *Ariel*'s words. Yet he was able to hear other things. He heard the whirring of a moth, putting out his hand for it to light upon.

Ariel felt a sudden fear, seeing that the old man could hear, but had not heard his words.

The old man curved his shoulders as though to get all the heat he could from the imagined fire. *Ariel* with a gentle sight looked at the emaciated hands where the moth was moveless.

'Will you share my food?' asked *Ariel*.

The old man still made no sign of recognition, nor of hearing *Ariel*. He crouched still closer to the fire. 'Keep the floor clear for me when I go,' he said, 'lay me out gently, the pennies for my eyes

are beside the fire. When it is cold I shall not be.

‘There was a figure which passed through this place some time ago. A running figure of a boy, knows nothing but the passing of the days, knows nothing but the travelling of time, hard under the sun, hard under the moon, country unknown and to the past. He was put together in a wandering night, born upon the wandering track. You know these things. They are plain for you to see. And who in the end does not see with something of that sight?’ Slow his words, slow as the passing of the day. ‘I’m prevaricating,’ said the old man, ‘no words for what I saw.’ He looked at *Ariel* as though he were part of the room. ‘The world’s contracted down,’ he said, ‘as something in the hand; too small now for the entering; too small to be a habitation.’ He put out a hand and touched the black fabric, he touched the hem of the grey striped cloth. ‘Do you record the precedents?’ he asked. ‘I was a lawyer, long ago, seems but an hour, now; the world’s diminished and is contracted down; now I could cover the sum of a life with the shade of a single hand.’ He raised his hand; the light was all but gone.

Ariel, unaware that his own clothes were those of a lawyer, shook his head, ‘they were given to me, I’ll go through the winter in them, by the end you wouldn’t know what they were.’

The old man gave no impression of having heard *Ariel*. Perhaps he sees only the clothes, said the young man, to himself. No, he remembers who I am, *Ariel* said, why this is important to me I do not know. He is at the extremity. He knows he is at the end. He sees me more clearly than I see myself. He doesn’t divorce me from my surroundings. He will see me in no other. He holds onto the hem of that garment of mine. Of mine? He holds it. The moth rests on his hand, it has the same markings as his skin. A whirring flight, it may last out the winter, beneath a joist. This room is clean. He thinks there is a fire.

‘There was a boy here, travel-conceived and travel-born, knows the end of it,’ said the old man.

‘Yes,’ said *Ariel*.

‘He is right, I think. Now I see more clearly the things that are plain day to him.’

They sat in silence.

Ariel reached out a hand; he saw the buttons of his own coat sleeve glimmer in the light of the dying fire. ‘Here is some wine.’

The old man made out the outlines of the tin mug by its feel rather than by its form. ‘Yes.’

The old man looked down, at his hands. He’s dry, said *Ariel*, very dry, I’ll put some water with it.

The old man’s eyes were closed. ‘You are the man who gave me the bread and wine, I shall not forget that, it was a decent act.’

Evening fell; the railway grew dark.

Ariel was drifting into sleep when he heard the old man mutter something. He could not catch the sense, perhaps the language was unknown to him, something from the past, he is asleep, said *Ariel*, to himself, in the dead of night he heard the moth, whirring off, through the star-square of the open window, into the world of indigo.

That night is now within the past: the two of them were undisturbed. Many travellers must have passed them by, for the railway was at that time crowded with journeyers.

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Ariel woke in the early morning, the square of light unfamiliar, not that it matters, you soon get used to that, strange it would seem if you had seen it in firstlight before, the open door, the grimy glass; the greater things, they’re always known, part of oneself, perhaps, outside the world lay heavily beneath the first hard frost, the blanket of mist lay on the lower ground, beneath the wood.

The inside of the room still was dark.

Ariel had slept in a greatcoat, which he now took off and hung over an insulator which had once been part of the telegraphic apparatus. Stripped to the waist he went outside and washed at the rain-water barrel at the back of the building, looking round at the station buildings as he did so. Cold, clear,

invigorating, he said, aloud, there was no-one to hear. His breath smoked in the quiet air.

He brought the firewood back to the waiting-room of the halt. He laid it by the stove. He died in the night, he thought, looking down at the old man's form, I knew it but I did not put it into words. Did not know the event, for what it was. The world has contracted, as he saw, could no longer hold. One day it will no longer house a mortal soul. Then it will be no more. That is what they say. I knew he was gone, some perseveration of a line of words, in the night. His face is cold. A fine dew, borne of the thin mist, lies on him, his scalp, his pale cheekbones, and on his beard.

I am hungry, said *Ariel*, I'll eat outside the door, to find the strength to bury him.

*

It is quiet; every footfall has a sound its own. There is only me to attend to him. So light. How the smell alters when they die. Remains for a while on the things they owned, not about the body. A strange smell, foreign, common to all, something which I do not understand. What a world that's understood in terms of smell's subtle changes. Dissolves upon the moment. Autumn day in a beechwood. Leafmould, cut with the railway's spade. The slight sound insistent, will never leave the mind, echoless in the trees. A worn spade. Worm in the handle. Ash. Dust. Go careful with the weight. Eastern Provincial Railway and the name of a station worn away where the left hand grips. Who last held this I do not know. About my build, from the wear upon the shaft. I say that but I wouldn't know.

It is quiet: where there is no footfall, there is the one primordium of sound. I take a survey, look all around myself, this seems to me to be within the present tense, there is no other, here is no other, this vale within the loose planting of the wood. Loose planting, the trees are far apart, but if you look far enough there's living wood in every line of sight. The railway takes the gentle gradient, obedient almost to the contours' curve. This must be a gentle and a rounded hill. Were it not for the boundary wires on the posts one might wander far and never know that one was lost. Perhaps many have done so, in the night, too tired to see the path in front of them. It's repetition of the days which loses you your senses. Here is the place where everyone must stop, put down their burden, look around themselves in quietness. All the trouble that there is comes from within. It is that which makes me stop in quietness.

Let us say I am the coroner, an old appointment, he asks the question, 'do you know his name?' The question hangs in the air, unanswered. 'Does no-one know his name? Or has it gone with him to the earth?' He stands beside me, a thoughtful man in melancholy black. Grizzled, rather. Perhaps he considers his own case, inseparable. 'What was his name in life?' There is no-one to give the answer. 'Do you have a name which is your own?' 'No, I have no name. Not that to have no name is to affirm nothing. Far from it. Nothing negative about an absence,' I say to him. He pauses, thinking about this, reflecting on it. 'He was a good man, sir, or I should not be walking from his burial place with a spade on my shoulder.' 'What did he own?' 'I do not know, sir. What he had beside him when he died I put down with him. He shall have the surface of the earth for his marker unparticular.' A little mound, covered with leaves, soon to be covered the more, autumn drawing on, the leaves are changing colour. The first beginning of the change. In the air, when our footfalls have gone, the coroner and I, no sound beyond the one primordium of sound.

Hark!

Ariel suddenly became alert: every sense was vigilant.

Someone was coming towards *Ariel* quickly, wasting energy in the extravagant movements of both the arms, and in kicking amongst the leaf-mould, not following the railway, rather, coming down from the skyline; they – singular apparently – had made out who *Ariel* was long before *Ariel* knew they had a human form – this recognition of the man *Ariel* was, and a recognition unreturned, says something, what – *Ariel* was unsure – but what it says is probably unpleasant, that's very likely, said *Ariel* – an evil premonition – fast-paced, or so *Ariel* thought at first, but when *Ariel* saw the movement of his arms *Ariel* knew that he was making his progress towards him slowly – they was now a he – in

time he would become again a they – *Ariel* could not hear his footfalls on the hillside, he had tracked down his identity, ‘I know you,’ said the stranger, pausing and shouting from a distance, then coming towards *Ariel* again, *Ariel* thought he might go past him, crossing without recognition the railway and going on down the hillside, if *Ariel* were to keep his silence and assume an indifferent expression, looking away from him, incuriously, but this did not occur, he stood in front of *Ariel*, too close to him for his comfort, peering at him rather, with an expression of great concern on his face, which contrasted with *Ariel*’s incurious habitus, saying again, ‘I know you.’ He was dressed for a day’s hunting, a tweed jacket, knee breeches, no more description’s necessary, he looked the part, but in ordinary life he would assuredly have worn a dark suit, double-breasted, a white shirt and a club tie, again, no more description’s needed. ‘No hard feeling towards me?’ he asked, holding out his hand, which *Ariel* did not take.

‘You don’t know me,’ said *Ariel*, commandingly, rather.

‘Ah, now you speak I’m sure of it! I know your voice! Here, take my hand, and say you have no hard feelings towards me,’ said the newcomer, in the loud voice of recognition.

Ariel looked at him.

‘Of course you know me,’ said the man, whose style of speech was so similar to a witness in *Ariel*’s trial that he searched his mind for his name, but neither name nor face would come to him. Oh, that does not matter, he said, it is in the past. Nor deportment. Nor in the striking mannerisms with the arms, raised while walking or speaking, in gestures which were quite the opposite in meaning – if this they had – to the words which accompanied them. *Ariel* said nothing, but stared in a neutral manner at him, as if he still thought that the man might leave him and go.

‘Just one word from you would put my mind at rest,’ said the man, ‘and then I’ll leave you.’

‘Who are you?’ asked *Ariel*, and then he thought, what a mistake it was to have asked that!

‘Ah! You’re adder-sharp! You ask my name. It’s important to you; you should have it on the forefront of your tongue – Sordesco is my name, Sordesco,’ he said, ‘Sordesco is the name I always had and Sordesco is the only name by which I’m known. Now, do you remember me?’

‘No,’ said *Ariel*, thinking to himself, am I being truthful or am I not, ‘I wouldn’t bother about the name, but you, no, that I do not know.’

Sordesco unbuttoned the collar of his shirt, as though it were too tight. ‘You will want to know how you were found,’ he said, ‘so thoroughly, so totally, nothing left to chance. Some small thing of absence, that is what it was, some incompleteness. I wonder what it is, I thought, I applied my mind, to the thought, walking to and fro, then it came to me, I saw you from the horizon, flat from one end of the earth to the other, and then you appeared, no name came into my mind, it was the vision of yourself: that was the thing which stood solidly on the one horizon, an upright form, with arms stretched out, no further attributes, none, but from that one sight, recall on the instant, total and profound.’ He stared meaningfully at *Ariel*. ‘You cast round, know a part is missing, then, in an instant, you have it, everything falls into place, and all’s complete.’

‘I don’t know you, said *Ariel*.

‘That’s what I was going to say,’ said Sordesco, complainingly, ‘I knew you from the horizon and yet you say you can’t recall me as I stand in front of you.’

‘I don’t know you, even your name means nothing to me.’

‘Then you have no hard feelings towards me?’

Ariel paused uncertainly. ‘Not yet,’ he said, ‘But it seems that time may come.’

The man shook his head with pleasure, smiling, clucking with his tongue, and said, ‘I knew that you would have a good and forgiving nature.’

‘Your name — ’

‘Sordesco,’ said the man, ‘I have been looking forward to this moment for many years. I had heard that you were walking, and someone I knew who lives hereabouts said that he was seen someone who could only have been you. So I came to see you and to express my good feeling towards you and to ask for your forgiveness.’

‘You said you recognized me on the horizon,’ said *Ariel*, with a flourish of logic, looking round at the woods, thinking to himself, my own words are distasteful to me, I don’t wish to use them so. You waste them in your own defence.

‘Ah! So I did! But that was a metaphor not many would understand. So I put it another way, one which most would follow.’ Sordesco paused, feeling through the pockets of the jacket; perhaps it was not his; perhaps he did not know what had been left inside it the last time it had been taken off. He took a whistle from one of the pockets, looked at it strangely, replaced it quickly, looking secretly at *Ariel* to see if *Ariel* had seen the whistle, which he had, he even saw its name, it was called the *Acme City*. ‘Chrome-plated,’ said Sordesco, laughing, ‘I never knew it was there, but this I’ve always found, throughout my life: what you need always seems to come to hand.

‘But this is immaterial; I need your forgiveness for what I have done and what I have to do. Do you forgive me?’

‘I must, as I don’t know you,’ said *Ariel*.

‘How memory and forgiveness are interlinked! One impossible without the other! And you straightforwardly forgive me. But you say it so lightly, as if it meant nothing to you.’

Ariel looked unspeakingly at him.

‘So nothing sticks to you,’ said Sordesco, looking at *Ariel* with approval and admiration. ‘Nothing sticks to you, not even the burden of a name; one little pack, that’s all you have, weighs nothing, new clothes: nothing sticks to you except – ‘ he lowered his voice and said, ‘ – except my recall of you. Whether from the horizon or by word of mouth, the means are nothing, pah, shake them away, what are they to men like you and me? Nor the time which it has taken me, nor the people I have questioned, nor the difficulties in the long slow nights, when I have lain awake, looking out at the tranquilnesses and the storms, indifferent to them all, staring inwardly, staring through the square of the window, the open casement in the summer, the moon would pass across the opening, so engrossed was I that when I looked up her shadow had moved, as though the long night of enquiry into his identity were one slow lozenge in motion, the small hours move so, the hours of the metamorphosis by which the memory congeals, I have him now, I said, difficult, at first, a protean identity, I would think I had it in a corner, then it would go, I would think it solid, then it would evaporate, then it came to me, as a small thing, in my hands, I sat naked at the edge of my bed, alone, how shall I find a man like this, who is close to me, but whose identity I do not know, I listened in the moonlight, the night was anything but silent, the salience of a person comes and goes, and then I stood up, looked out through the open window, to the edge of the horizon, it is he, the one figure that moves, all else is still, all else is in the background, I have him.’

Ariel looked at him. How he distrusted him. For some reason — perhaps to put the image of Sordesco out of his mind — he thought of Mrs Kixil, the woman riding sidesaddle, slim and attractive, who had given *Ariel* her husband’s clothes. Could he have grown to be Mrs Kixil’s smart and obedient boy? Her orders would always have been intelligent and fair; there is no doubt about that. How could he find her again? Would it be possible? « Let’s give it a try, he would say to her; I’ve never met a woman like you. » He pictured her in his mind. He touched her card.

‘And where are you going now? You surprise me with your clothes, for you were never one for precedent. Are you on a court circuit?’

Ariel looked at him with great distrust.

‘Your suit! I must ask you your tailor’s name!’ shouted Sordesco, his voice loud but his words swallowed by the woods, gesturing with his arms, ‘tell me your tailor’s name, please, I’ll find out all from that: and that will be enough!’

‘What is the importance of a name?’ asked *Ariel*, looking inside the coat, on the lining behind the pocket; Sordesco, impatient, pushed his hand inside *Ariel*’s coat, pulling at the cloth.

‘That’s enough,’ said *Ariel*, pushing his hand away, but immediately he had done this Sordesco put his other hand inside *Ariel*’s coat, about the region of his heart, *Ariel* grasped him by the wrist: Sordesco had seized the lining of the coat, the shirt with it, and was now pulling it towards him, *Ariel*

pushing him away.

Ariel was easily the stronger of the two, and Sordesco, winded from his efforts, stepped back, looking round himself at the forest, as though he disliked the place. He looked towards *Ariel*. 'There's no tailor's label in the coat,' he said, 'it's been cut out.'

That would be Mrs Kixil, the widow, said *Ariel* to himself, hardly putting these thoughts in words, she cut it out, kept her husband's place away from others. How I wish I could have been her smart boy. Oh, I say that now she isn't here, but how quickly her rule would chafe. Possibly. I don't know. Now I shall never know.

Ariel tried to put Sordesco out of his mind, but this was more easily said than done; he knew that, were he to move away, the man would follow him.

'Come with me,' said Sordesco, pleadingly, standing away from *Ariel* and holding out his hands, palms uppermost, 'as a friend.'

'No,' aid *Ariel*, 'I have lost the best part of the day already.'

'Come with me, and let me buy you dinner; it is the least that I can do, it would be best if you were to come with me in a spirit of amicability, that would be for the best; you have yourself said that the past is not amenable to feats of memory, but comes back, altered, as persons change, degree and reason pass from face to face, the only truth the circumstance. Dark weights come together. They accide. That is what you said. And now you claim you have no name, and you have no thing to lose, one might say that that is testable, and you can be assured it will be tested to the full. When you say the spirit is supple, it will make its home in no rigid mind or body, I thought to myself, that's to be tested, and it will be tested, to the full.' He lowered his voice still further, his mouth only a few inches from *Ariel's* ear. 'You should not build a word upon a word without knowing how they will be pulled apart.' Having said this Sordesco stood back from *Ariel* and looked at his face, as if to judge the effect of his words. 'The car is a quarter of a mile distant, by the road, you can accompany me in good faith, or, look behind, well, that's the way of things, look, coercion is never far behind.'

Ariel began to walk away, towards the railway line.

Sordesco, seeing that he would never be able to keep up with *Ariel*, stopped, as if remembering something, put a hand into his pocket, took out the *Acme City*, looked at it for a moment, then he put it to its lips; a double-whistle, a penetrating and discordant note: at its sound three men appeared from the darkness of the wood.

'Why does their stare make me feel faint?' asked *Ariel*, pausing in his stride and looking down at the ground. 'I have difficulty standing. Answer me that.'

'You will come with me, then?'

'Sordesco, there is nothing else that I can do.'

Sordesco spoke to his assistants. 'You will know him again.'

'Yes,' said one,

'Yes,' said the second,

'Yes,' said the third.

'Take off your coat,' Sordesco said to *Ariel*.

Ariel took off his coat.

'Unbutton your shirt.'

Ariel unbuttoned his shirt.

'He should have a small birthmark on the skin above his left shoulder-blade. Yes, there it is, no mistake of identity. And a smaller birthmark on the left side of his neck, where the rope will go. Do you see that?'

The assistants, who were all very close together, looking at *Ariel's* body, one of them even touching his skin, gave their agreement.

'One fine autumn day,' said Sordesco, 'and it comes to this. You may put your coat back on.'

Ariel looked at him with his eyes round.

'Why do you look at me like that?' asked Sordesco.

Ariel said nothing, buttoning his shirt again, staring at Sordesco.

‘Your face is as resentful as an abused boy’s,’ said Sordesco.

‘I wish you were out of my sight, whoever you are,’ said *Ariel*, staring at him, as though by his stare he would drive him away.

‘Don’t lay onto me the guilt you feel,’ said Sordesco, ‘but, if you must, then I’m broad-shouldered. My name is Sordesco, I have a name — ’

‘I don’t think that your name is Sordesco,’ said *Ariel*, still looking at him. ‘I think that you stole the name from another man, who now is dead. He was dirty, though less dirty than you: and so you stole his name.’

They stood in silence.

‘You won’t last long,’ said Sordesco. ‘Not now.’ Then he looked at *Ariel*, as if to follow the gist of what *Ariel* had just said, and what had been in his mind, and then he looked at *Ariel* again, to register something of his present physiognomy and expression in his mind, and, as though unable to give an answer to the reason why he was pursuing *Ariel*, without definite conclusion, he looked at *Ariel* again, heaven knows why, then he turned, and walked down the ride, the three men following him.

Now, did this affair take place? That was *Ariel*’s thought as he walked along the railway. What evidence was there for it, he asked himself, I am crossing an elaborate girder bridge, and the country is wooded, was the scene something I brought with me, he said, is it in the nature of memory to do that, to whom can I turn to ask for advice. Then he walked on in a kind of internal silence, though the woods were noisy with the sound of birds, how many people were travelling on the railway, one often wonders that, he said to himself, looking down at a tiny stream, a vast number are on the road, but one so rarely sees them, Oh, sometimes, but not often, sometimes one senses them, sometimes you sense, and avert your sight, they sense, avert their sight, a man in a strange posture with his shirt unbuttoned, sometimes you see too clearly, sometimes in a crowded street you see innumerable faces and you yourself are never seen. Sometimes you go the way through the hours of a day unknown, while the world moves and the ages break. A drink of water, I need a drink of water and then some food. I’ll go to a farm and work for a week. Stay, they’ll say. I can’t; that is all that I can say.

X

He stood, a man in a ragged line, underneath the canopy of a wayside railway station, looking at an old calendar which fluttered on the wall; he had kept no reckoning of the miles, nor of the days, nor of the places he had passed through: the track might have been endless, so straight was it.

Snow lay on the embankment but the dark track passed to the horizon.

The flagstones on which he stood stretched away to the last of the platform lamps, a dark and leaning line against the grey horizon, tomorrow that way, he turned round, stared over the heads of those behind him, yesterday, that way, perhaps the two horizons are one. One horizon. Now, for the moment, I am here, as brief a place as any other, will never know its name, would not remember if I knew.

Inside the goods-shed a trestle table had been raised, by its side a field-stove and soup-pans and a tray of broken loaves. Three women, dressed against the weather, gave out the wayfarer's dole of bread and soup; two of them wore mittens, as though on an afternoon last week one of them had said to the others, my hands are cold, I used to suffer the cold badly as a child. *Ariel* saw this, looked away along the railway, bring the dish back to us, said one of the women, I will, he said, I will, he held it in his hands, a dish from someone's home, the bread and spoon were in his hand; he stood beneath the nameboard of the station, the name as unimportant as any other name, nothing that lasts can have a name, said *Ariel* to himself, oh, for a while it has a name.

'Do you speak?' asked another, quietly spoken himself.

'Yes,' said *Ariel*, looking at him.

'You have the look of someone mute from birth,' said the man, 'an expression in your face. Something not in common with the rest of us. He has no words, I thought.'

Ariel considered this. 'It would be better had I been dumb.'

'You look at what others would pass by unnoticed. You don't even take the path for granted.'

Leave him, *Ariel*, he said to himself. I don't know what he wants. Not much perhaps. Leave him, let him go.

I don't want people round me, I don't want to be one of many, standing round a coke brazier, a pierced can.

The tallest of the local women was washing the dishes in a high-sided enamel bowl; her hands were puckered with immersion. She was a handsome woman of about forty. *Ariel* laid his emptied dish beside the bowl, seeing its rounded shadows in the lamplight. It is the sort of thing my mother would have done, he said, the face is not the same, the act identical. I wouldn't say the face was foreign. He watched the movement of her diffuse shadow on the station wall. I would like to speak to her, to thank her, but, yes, I'll say it, he was right, often am I dumb, often, can do nothing, if I said the words which came to mind they would not bear my sense, why this is I sometimes think I know, they give blank looks at what I say, mouth half-open sometimes. *Thank-you, lady*. You learn a lot by what they give back to you. I do not know, I do not even think in words, not even now, Oh, one extrapolates, too much polish is what the words lay upon the thoughts, polishing in the grime. She is looking at me, perhaps what I am will speak for me, in the lineaments of face and form, whatever that may be, experiences undergone as one, but separately, she and I, we understand, that is for the best, snow is falling through the roof, where the glass has gone, I stare upwards, when I'm a little distant I'll look back, I know I will, I am like that, always looking backwards, to see a building from a distance, now I am too close, from a distance I will be able to see it better, the snow beginning to fall, the line going on empty but for the men and women, walking, waiting, facing each other, too far to hear what they say. They say that true loneliness comes in winter. That is what they say. It is probably not true. Until you are at the end you wouldn't know. They begin to walk again, leaving such warmth as there is. The most graceful amongst them is no more than a dark and soot-black smudge in the falling of the night, sometimes you meet a new one, the questions mine, that's just what I said, what I asked, which I no longer ask. But someone has to form them in their mind. Perhaps that is the person they call a simple soul.

That's a thing to take to heart. The light from the paraffin lamps and the field-stove makes it look remote in time. Which one day it will be.

*

Night set in quickly. A family was huddled beneath an arch that carried a lane over the railway. Moorland stretched away for miles. 'May I join you?' asked *Ariel*; and wait for the snow to finish? there's hardly a breath of wind.'

'It is not our arch,' said the wolfish young man, 'where do you come from?'

'The city,' said *Ariel*.

'How many cities have you come through?' asked the young man.

'Countless, said *Ariel*. 'I never knew the names of most of them.'

'You have to make the best opportunity in the place in which you find yourself,' said the young man, 'here is my wife, here are my children, we teach them all we can, that which is to hand, what more can I do?' he said.

'They wouldn't understand much else, no-one ever does, you can only take what comes to hand, the rest's imagined,' said *Ariel*, 'whatever the coast-line where you are washed up, you don't choose it, rocks or sand, night or day, age or edges of an age.'

'That's true,' said the young man, his sharp face barely seen in the firelight. He said: 'an itinerant preacher married us when Kate found she was pregnant.' He looked towards his wife, observant, wrapped in a blanket, the baby at her breast. 'He said he was a preacher; whether that was true or not I do not know. He wore the remains of a black Canterbury cap on his head. We fed him for the day and that was the last we saw of him.'

'Your eyes are beautiful,' said *Ariel*. This was true.

'Thank-you,' said Kate.

'How difficult it is just being,' said the young man, 'our parents have gone, we never knew how far behind us and the babes they put themselves, one does not know these things until the evidence is seen, the broken shards, the fragments; how difficult it is.'

'With a family especially,' said *Ariel*, 'always some new problem: I have some food to give you.'

'Food first,' said the young man, 'they say you'd believe in anything to fill a hunger, but it is not true, they say it of themselves, perhaps, and then perhaps it's true.' His hands were large and square, the proportions went against the thinness of his face; he held them out, 'what do you have?' looking down keenly.

'You'll see,' said *Ariel*.

'One more day,' said the young man.

'Thank you,' said Kate.

'No-one has a name, in the end,' said the young man, 'and the saying is, the line's best wintered in good company.'

'I heard the opposite,' said *Ariel*, 'everything goes down to a single thread in winter, all hangs by a single thread.'

'They mean the same,' said the young man, 'they mean just the same.'

The arch sprang from just above his head, the smoke from the little fire drifted up inside the brickwork of the arch and then flowed out. They watched the smoke in silence. 'There is no wind, said the young man.'

'None at all,' said *Ariel*.

'Sometimes I am troubled,' said the young man.

'By what?' asked *Ariel*.

'Sometimes I think that I have travelled so much that I have travelled the day ahead already: now there's nothing which I have not seen before.'

‘You are still young,’ said Kate.

‘I have not told you this before,’ said the young man, ‘but it seems I know the day’s journey a day ahead: I see what is over the horizon as though it was there I stood. I know what will be there.’

They travelled through the winter; the thin young man, Kate, and *Ariel* each carried a child. I’ve been taken into the family for as long as it lasts, said *Ariel*, to himself whether I want it or not, you have to walk along the sands where you were washed ashore. We’ll go looking for firewood in that stand of ash trees.

He was walking ahead, and now stood still, looking down over the snow-covered landscape, the dark hedges and copses and the white fields; the sky was grey; more snow was about to fall. Here the railway was cut deeply through the rocks. There was a high-arched farm accommodation bridge, abutments of stone and arch of blue brick: a handsome structure. I know this place. His heart began to beat rapidly. The high rock stayed with him in memory, the black stone edge. He looked upwards to the sky’s sawn line. He was aware of the cold. The child he carried began to cry.

He looked back at the track; the thin young man and his wife were running towards him, silent in the snow. To *Ariel* there was something ferocious about the intensity of their eyes: he found himself pierced. They stood, man and woman, in silence, the breath coming out of their mouths in broken streams.

‘What is happening?’

Who spoke? Husband or wife? Both? Perhaps their expressions were all.

What is happening to you?

Ariel looked down. He slowly put the child on the ground. The young man put his hand on *Ariel*’s forearm, and *Ariel* shook it off and turned his head away. By the very conventions of the travellers he would be alone now.

He walked for no more than half a mile and stood upon the viaduct. The bells of the churches were booming out, those of the cathedral deep beneath them. Then, as though to change the dispensation of the world, the great bourdon of the western tower began to toll.

The sound of the bells shook the snow from the steeples, and the weather-vanes lanced the air.

Three men were walking along the viaduct from the further end. How different they were physically, one from the others; yet he could not identify any of them. Now and then one of them would look down, over the snowbound city, as though enthralled by the sight; one of them pushed a little snow from the parapet, watching its gyrations as it fell to the remote ground: but these acts were merely digressions: they had at last seen the traveller. At first they looked at him, one of them pointing at him, then they turned away; for a little while they continued their game of pushing the snow from the parapet and watching it fall into the void; then they would look again at the traveller, who stood in the middle of the dark track, his feet amongst the innumerable footprints; as they approached him, so they began to walk more quickly, their faces more and more certain; their stare at last became fixed on him in recognition.

XI

‘Why are we waiting in this queue of visitors?’ asked *Ariel*, looking through the falling snow. He hardly recognized the narrow street between the high buildings though the city was his own; even now he was unsure whether he had been in this street before, so narrow that it was little more than an alley, but with men and women constantly walking up and down; he looked at their faces, and, as he saw each, he asked, do I know that man? Do I know that woman? A clock nearly overhead tolled out the hour. This, then, is the centre of it, and the oldest part, he said, for the bell’s sound was so familiar to him that it took him straight back to the years of his childhood, the dusty summers — it is unchanged, he said to himself, between the strokes of the tolling bell; in thought he travelled down the years, as swiftly as an arrow, always I remember this queue of people waiting here, he said, as the bell tolled overhead, the echoes and the reverberations giving the impression that the bell sounded from no real tower but from the snow-filled sky above his head: we have come at last to a place I know but by a circuitous and wayward path.

‘Is that what you think this is, a queue of visitors?’ said the first man, banging his hands together for warmth, a stream of vapour coming from his mouth as he spoke the words. The pavement was narrow and uneven; they could only stand on it in single file, and the man behind *Ariel* held onto *Ariel*’s coat, as much for his own support as to prevent *Ariel* from following any action of his own, the flagstones being icy.

‘This is where we usually stand; the entrance is ahead, and that’s the way we usually go in,’ said the second, who was behind the first, and speaking over his shoulder, his voice louder and more distinct, his manner simple and direct. ‘We know of no other. If there is a quicker way, you might tell us; we would be grateful to you.’

Ariel thought to himself, this line of people in which we stand, it is, surely, the visitors’ queue. That’s my assumption, but they are certainly surprised by it; so perhaps I’m mistaken, these people who wait are not visitors; but, then, who else might they be? I can’t begin to think. This must be a queue of would-be visitors; maybe he has never wondered what they were waiting for, so any suggestion from anyone would be novel to him.

‘There are other lines of people in other streets, as you probably remember,’ said the first, ‘but we’ll keep to this, as it is known to us; it’s snowing but that’s not unpleasant, and, when you reflect upon these days in time to come, you may well be grateful to us for these last few moments, he said, and, thank you for taking your time with us.’

‘Everything I do works to a malign disadvantage,’ said *Ariel*.

‘And why not?’ said the first, ‘that is what progress is all about; in a sense you spend your whole life waiting in a queue.’

‘I could do with some food,’ said the second, in his direct manner.

‘He shall share ours,’ said the third.

The first man was aware of *Ariel*’s apprehension. ‘Think of this as another episode in your life, another day’s journey.’

‘We live in linear ways,’ said the second man (his voice slow and deep; he examined the prints in the snow as he spoke; you would have put him down as simple), ‘as thought partakes of light. There is never a place but where you can to some extent see your way on and back. There is never a place but where you are aware, no mind how dimly, of the tether to the past and the tether to the place which is to come. Stretched or slack, they sound out like a muted string. How the stopping fingers play these strings! Believe me if you wish, or not, so much depends on what you yourself have seen. Oh, in the end, none of it’s of much importance, it’s all hyperbole. But, yes, at the end of it all we’ll share our food with you, if you have an appetite.’

‘And then what will happen?’ asked *Ariel*, over his shoulder, aloud, as if they repelled him, which as it happened was true; he looked at them as if he would have to spend the rest of his life with them: in order to distance himself from them he cast his mind back to Mrs Kixil, the woman who had

ridden side-saddle on the mule, miles and days away, her riding stance elegant; her back perfectly straight on her mule, her tightly-tailored habit revealing her narrow waist and her authoritatively angled shoulders. A smart and obedient boy. Could I have been her smart and obedient boy? I could have tried. But that's all over: I shall never find out now. Discreetly, perhaps even furtively, he put his hand into his breast pocket and took out Mrs Kixil's card, looking at the name with wonderment. Could she help me in my present predicament, do you suppose? He asked himself.

They moved forward a pace, the little door at the side of the great gateway was opened, a visitor was questioned and was allowed to enter, then the door was closed again. This unending repetition made *Ariel* nervous – what are we all waiting for? – and he looked at the little door with foreboding: he thought to himself, allowing the words to come to his mind, from the day of my birth I was a target for bribery by an hour of liberty. Now they want to buy me with the promise of freedom; they want to buy me with the promise of eternal life; in the end they just want to buy me as they would any other commodity. To them souls are fungible. He looked at the narrow door as it opened ahead of him, nothing would be great enough, none of that would buy me. Wait til you are hungry, they used to say, pausing to stare, standing beneath the downfalling light, wait til you are hungry: if you are empty enough without a word you'll seize whatever's reached down to you, whatever is the offer, lest the hand be withdrawn upon your least hesitation, blink, and it is gone. I didn't even identify that which was being offered. Even in the intensity of hunger I felt disgust at all they reached down, I did not even hesitate before I turned my back.

'How many more to go?' asked the first, gently tapping *Ariel*'s arm; *Ariel* was taller than any of them and could see what was going on at the gate, about five more, he said.

'Don't be angry with us,' said the second, 'it is not our fault, if you were in our position, you'd be doing just the same.'

'It soon goes, this little time, patient one has been and patient one must be,' said the first, 'even now we don't know what you're waiting for, even now that's not been formed. Maybe that's the case. It has been said, in so many words. This little time soon goes; count the minutes, if you wish, that's what children do, sometimes, the first time a watch comes into their hands, staring at the dial they count the minutes, open-mouthed, or you needn't count; instead you could leave your mind blank, if that is how you like it, make out that it doesn't fall into the realm of time. Possibly that's true. You don't have to put your apprehensions into words, as you yourself have said. Think of all the freedoms you possess.'

The first man looked at *Ariel*; his manner, which had been somewhat diffident and even evasive, now resembled that of the second man, who was further away from *Ariel*. He spoke more directly, as though time were running out; they had been here for over an hour, the quarters had sounded from the clock-tower overhead, again it seemed that the sound came down from the muffled and snowy sky. He said, 'but I'd ask you this one small thing: do you wish us to include you in our conversation, or shall we leave you out of it, to think about what you have to think of, and, while disturbing you as little as possible, talk amongst ourselves? You might as well use the little time that remains to you in the way which suits you best.'

The bell stopped tolling, and the first man waited in silence for an answer.

'Do as you please,' said *Ariel*, speaking quickly, as if to be done with speech. His unease was evaporating, and was being replaced by the anger of frustration.

'That's thoughtful of you,' said the first.

They waited in silence.

'How many more remain?' said the first.

'Three more,' said *Ariel*. He thought, they don't speak amongst themselves, which is what he said they would like to do. In fact, he thought, they speak only to me. I'm not sure what this means. Are they dumb when I am not here?

'How many more remain?' said the first.

'One,' said *Ariel*.

Then it was finished: they stood before the narrow door; as in passing through the night-door of a church, one would have to stoop to enter. *Ariel* put a hand to the centre of a wooden panel, feeling the place worn down by the constant knocking of knuckles; he was reminded of the saint's tomb, stones long since removed, its precinct marked only by the hollows worn by kneeling penitents.

Ariel turned back to the three men. It's no use asking them what should be done, he said, whatever they say will turn out to my confusion, that's certain. And anything I say is likely to damage my integrity.

The day grew colder, the sky darker, and the snow began to fall more thickly. *Ariel* huddled in the doorway, half stooping, the three men behind him settling down to wait. They are as mortal as I, said *Ariel*, to himself, finding that although the doorway gave some shelter against the rising wind, the need to stoop was more uncomfortable with every minute which passed; first he bent his neck, forward, then to one side, then he straightened his spine and bent his knees, repeating these actions, as his discomfort grew, but even the cycle of postures grew to be uncomfortable; furthermore, even in the deep doorway the wind was beginning to find a way; he could hear it whistling in the large key-hole and round the ill-fitting sides and it had begun to howl in the hollow of the step. They will only grow tired of waiting, and knock on the door themselves, said *Ariel*, so I might as well knock myself, which is in any case what they are waiting for me to do. He wondered what Mrs Kixil's advice might have been.

He looked down the alley, past the three men; suddenly it had grown empty throughout its length; the snow was falling freshly on the footprints and the tyre-tracks and was drifting at the corner; a weather-vane creaked above his head: the wind was changing. How lonely he was! The three figures, solid though they were, seemed to be losing their sentience. He released himself from the doorway, stretched his limbs, the snow falling on his unbrushed hair; the three men, one after the other, removed their hats and knocked off the snow, brushed their shoulders.

Ah! Hope!

Suddenly *Ariel* thought that they were about to go, for with his acute sight he saw them passing glances from one to another; not that this in itself required any acuity of sight; there was exaggeration in their glances, which, after a moment caused *Ariel* to wonder if they had been passed for his benefit.

'Are you about to go?' he said.

There was a terrible silence; one of profound embarrassment.

'We were just about to go,' said the first, 'but have decided against it. I speak for the three of us.'

'Why was that?' asked *Ariel*, his voice incredulous.

'Put it this way. We thought that you were in the end more patient than ourselves, and, further, we thought that you had the nature of this waiting worked out, and that you would never leave. And so we were prepared to leave. Indeed, we wished to leave. But all that changed when you asked us if we were about to leave, because it showed that you were waiting here merely for our departure, and not because you understood the purpose of your being here. Nature is like that. Surely it's one of the first lessons of childhood: doesn't every mother constrain her child?'

Ariel looked at him as if finding his words difficult to believe, though he might have expected some reasoning of this kind; in their presence he even found himself undergoing strange torsions of logic himself.

'Is what you say true?' said *Ariel*.

'Yes, it is quite true, incontrovertibly,' said the first man, 'and now it's all in the open we shall never leave; we have come down with our decision; until we made it we did not even know there was a decision to be made. Maybe in truth it had no form. But now it's made material, and now we stay.'

'So I decide whether you stay or whether you go,' said *Ariel*.

'Exactly. You had perfect freedom,' said the first man. 'And you've made your decision. And your decision was final. It is finished. It cannot now be revoked. Please believe me.'

Ariel looked past the three men at the empty street, its thin and long monochrome perspective,

dark stone, white sky and street. He turned back to the door, put his knuckles to the worn panel, knocked. He heard the three men coming up behind him, oh I suppose their nature was up in the air until I knocked, I see how this will all turn out —

The door opened, and the three men as one pushed *Ariel* inside, as quickly as possible, now the decision had been made, the demand for admission granted and the door opened. *Ariel* was taken completely by surprise, and, although he was a strong and well-made if slim young man he found himself pushed inside with some force, and was lucky to remain on his feet. He stood in the darkness inside, looking out through the narrow door, the forms of the three men filling it for a moment, as though to make sure that *Ariel* was well and truly inside, and then the door was closed. The sound of its spring-lock was surprisingly soft.

The prosecutor – if such he could be called, for he had been very helpful to *Ariel* at his trial – stood before him, dressed for the courtroom; they had difficulty in recognizing each other for some little time, the place being so dark.

‘Come to the light,’ said the prosecutor, standing in the echoing chamber, but preparing to walk away towards a dim lamp which hung from a kind of metal gallows fastened to a pillar. ‘Come to the light,’ he said, ‘I can’t see you as you stand – the opening of the door has taken away my sight and I don’t have good night-vision — but I think I know you.

Do I know his voice? asked *Ariel*, to himself.

Together they walked across the polished floor, through the dimness, towards the light, the prosecutor’s footsteps silent, *Ariel*’s shod boots made him sound like a workman. The distant light cast long shadows of their walking forms, less and less attenuated with every step, and growing large, until when *Ariel* stood before the lamp – which hung low, as though it were a reading-lamp, though the lectern beneath was empty – his shadow filled the vault, while the prosecutor’s shadow ran down the night-dark aisle.

They looked at each other in the flickering yellow lamplight.

‘I know you,’ said the prosecutor, though even after he had recognized *Ariel* he continued to look into his face, obliquely, half-way between full-face and profile, and somewhat upward; perhaps he is trying to read something into my character, said *Ariel*, remembering all the little acts of kindness which the man had done for him when he had been a child.

‘You’re inexpressive,’ said the prosecutor.

Ariel continued to stare away into the body of the building; he could hear the wind, high in the timbers of the roof: if the snow kept up all night, what a weight the roof would bear.

‘When did you return to the city?’ asked the prosecutor, still looking at him; indeed it seemed as though he was trying to read aspects of the experiences which *Ariel* had undergone from a detailed examination of his face.

‘Today,’ said *Ariel*.

‘This will go down well for you, you don’t know one half of it —’ He turned away at last, as though he could no longer bear to look at *Ariel*, the sight of him is just too painful, he said to himself, it makes me think too much of my own past. As he spoke his voice trembled with emotion, as though a few moments ago he just been making a point in a passionate debate with such close control that he was now exhausted.

He reached out to *Ariel*, pulling the young man to himself by the sides of his coat, which had become unbuttoned during his struggle with the men outside the narrow door; the prosecutor embraced him: he smells of sweat, said *Ariel*, to himself, as if he had been through a physical ordeal; now that he embraced *Ariel* he seemed to be deprived of the power of speech.

‘I admire you,’ said the prosecutor, his voice breaking with emotion.

Ariel looked at him, his eyes round.

‘You have vindicated every hope and trust that was ever put in you,’ said the prosecutor.

Ariel said nothing.

‘Do you have a question to ask?’ said the prosecutor. ‘Surely not! You have returned on the

moment of the sentence.' He began to weep, putting his head on *Ariel's* shoulders. 'Oh! what use is there in putting your feelings into words? It does you credit – no words are strong enough – it is a lesson for humanity.' *Ariel* could feel the man's tears running down his own cheek, no doubt they were as salt as his own would have been, I don't know who he is with certainty, I told him that I did, but he reminds me of so many, said *Ariel*, to himself, and their names don't matter much, they're mostly in the past, but only my father would hold me like this, hold me in an embrace, and weep on my shoulder, does this man love me, does he think he is my father, does he regard me as his son? His prodigal son?

They stood together in the lamplight, the building all around them dark to distance; remotely some windows caught the lamplight and returned it.

'Have you anything to say?' said the man, in between his sobbing breaths.

'No,' said *Ariel*, answering more by stance than speech.

'That, too, does you credit, and not just you: it does credit to the world and age in which you live your life, and which, by a single word you – unvoiced – affirm.'

As he said this *Ariel's* arms were pinioned to his sides by men who must have been waiting in the dark. The whole crowd of them, with *Ariel* somewhere near its centre, began to move. *Ariel*, filled with curiosity, his grey eyes wide and his hair standing up like a flame, raised his face towards a skylight, looking up at darkness, for the snow had blanketed the glass, and what should have been the indigo of the day's end was a dirty greyness where the lamp-light was reflected. He looked at the prosecutor – if the man were really he – and saw as though for the first time his noble and gentle face, changed by a lifetime of service to the city: *Ariel* remembered him as being stocky, middle-aged, with broad shoulders, sweat about the bald patch on his head; perhaps after all it was not the same man, but, as though he knew that the young man was staring at him he turned round, stared in turn at *Ariel's* face with his dark eyes; there were flecks of spittle round the corners of his mouth, as though he had been delivering passionate oratory only a few moments ago, indeed, echoes of it seemed to hang in the air even now, coming back at him from the vaults of the unseen roof. *Ariel* looked at the corners of his mouth, violent speech made visible, he said to himself, his thought imperturbable. They paused for a few moments by the side of a narrow lancet window, *Ariel*, drawn to the light, flung himself at this little lancet, pulling the men who held his arms; Wait, he said; he looked out, as though the lancet were an exterior eye, to see the viaduct, high, visible softly through the snow-storm: who would have guessed that it was more solid than a thing of the mind? It seemed so immaterial amongst the millions of falling flakes. Much more solid seemed the cathedral and the parliament buildings, whose grey spires and domes appeared so little that, in comparison with the vast and pale structure which lay behind them, they seemed hardly to lift their tops from the ground. Close to the window, opposite the lancet, in the city square, the gates of the preceptorial college opened and the academicians came out, a gaggle of old men dressed in the red and blue robes and the doctoral hats of the college, their skinny legs taking the trampled snow and the slush with care, their white stockings flecked with ordure; like strange birds they stood in the city square, holding the skirts of their robes and their sticks in their hands, the traffic slowly moving round them, then, one by one, as though upon the order of a precedent, they queued at the shadowed arch and entered the low portal. He saw, as a background to the city, the viaduct, for the last time, the snow closing in; for a time he could see an arch in the swirl of snow, and then a part of a pillar, like a torso, or two pillars, like the legs of a man, or a length of parapet, an arm outstretched, or two arched voids, like eyes. The night was falling; it would be falling up on the railway, as sleep upon the thoughts within a mind.

A figure appeared at the end of the corridor, walking briskly towards them. This figure, seen at first in outline against a distant window, became a man. He was a young man, perhaps in his late twenties. He was slightly above average height; he was taller than the prosecutor, but he could not be called tall. His slimness emphasised his height. His dress was that of someone associated with the law of the city; his white shirt was clean and formal. His hair was slightly longer than was customary, and was coarse and black, but already there were grey streaks in it. His face was narrow, but he had

prominent cheekbones. He looked briefly at *Ariel*, how dumb he looks, and faraway, his hair aflame, perhaps he knows what's coming, he might have thought, but he stood next to him: anyone who stood in front of them would have been forced to compare them, an extraordinary comparison. Standing next to *Ariel* he thus faced the prosecutor. *Ariel* was aware of his smell, caged male animality.

When the newcomer spoke, his voice was deeper than might have been expected from so slim a man. He bowed slightly to the prosecutor as he spoke, *Ariel* looked sideways at him, seeing for a moment, as it were behind him, his wife and children, his obligations and his limits, the nature of the things he was prepared to do.

'What is it?' said the prosecutor.

'It's by precedent that we make no mistake about his identity.' The way he said this was mild and deferential.

Two of the guards began to strip *Ariel*; one of them ripped his borrowed shirt to show the birthmarks, one on the skin above the shoulder-blade, one on the neck.

'Is that enough proof?' asked the prosecutor.

'There is scar on the front of the left wrist,' said the young man.

'Is that proof enough?'

'For the present purpose,' said the young man.

Ariel looked at the young man, expecting to see the neutrality of someone who cowers behind an official duty, but he did not see this; he saw only the conflict of duty and compassion.

The door was opened by one of the guards.

The death-cell was a small high-ceilinged chamber with a central stage which held the pine-baulks of the gallows. For a second *Ariel*, startled by the light, saw nothing but the hanging corpse with the hooded head and all around the faces of the witnesses.

The door was closed. The young man with the greying hair looked at his watch. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but he did not speak; he swallowed noisily, as though his mouth were dry.

*

Ariel stood on the wooden platform. He looked at the faces which stared at him, unwilling now to give them expression or identity. It is not mine to give, he said to himself. His hands were tied behind his back; between the fore and index fingers of his right hand he held Mrs Kixil's card; it was the only thing he had left.

The executioner approached him, holding the black hood. It is a clean one, never been used before, said *Ariel* to himself. That's at least something.

The young man with the greying hair looked at his watch.

'Wait,' said *Ariel*.

The young man's voice followed on the echo of *Ariel*'s appeal; in its tone there was an earnest wish to prolong *Ariel*'s life. 'Has he — ' He turned to the other men, all of whom were older than he, '— has he made his confession?'

'Just as he was sentenced in his absence he was absolved in his absence,' said one of the others, as though the young man had asked something foolish.

*

The execution over and the coroner's post-mortem carried out, the cause of death ascertained and the death-certificate signed, the dead man's family would be allowed to take possession of the corpse and to bury or cremate it according to their religious persuasion. If the dead man had no family, the corpse would be buried, at the expense of the city, in a windswept and steeply inclining cemetery that lay unfenced up in the hills, near the railway, the grave unmarked.

*

Having laid an evergreen wreath on the mound of the grave, the young woman in the dark bombasine riding-habit stood with her gloved hands folded one in the other. Her head was bowed. For some time she stood there, silent and still beneath the grey sky: then she left the cemetery, walking slowly through the long grass to the railway. She untethered her mule from the cast-iron boundary-marker, stroked its neck, breathed gently into its nostrils, adjusted the saddle, and, using a mile-post as a foot-rest, mounted aside the animal. Then she positioned her somewhat dusty riding-skirt, clicked her tongue against her palate, shook the bridle, touched the mule's near flank with her heel and its off flank with her cane, and resumed her slow journey down the track, beneath a high accommodation bridge of dark limestone, her thoughts remote and elusive.

The End