

I left the man with whom I had been living one morning in late summer after opening the wardrobe and seeing the tidy line of his shirt collars, white and blue, white and blue. I felt sick. I began to see my life rolling out in front of me and it looked like the street on which we then lived, with the blue and green and white houses and the red and yellow doors. And I could discern in the distance the seasons rolling in, and the apples falling in the orchard, and the windows freezing shut, and the blue smell of spring, and the children in the wading pool in the baked summer light. And I knew that underneath it all were these hard and secret things. Prior to this moment, which proved in fact to be a decisive one in the course of my life, I had been afraid of being alone. The notion that I was free in theory but also in practice to do whatever I liked with my life was terrifying; it was nothing short of a nightmare. I moved to a low stone cottage on a street of low stone cottages. Soon it was autumn and the windows looked out onto the night, which fell promptly at half past four in the afternoon. All around me was quiet. During the day I sat at my desk and felt the light drain from the bedroom as the sun moved out of the eastern sky. I watched the trees submit to the passing of the seasons. Various birds came and went. Occasionally I ventured into the garden to collect leaves into a brown bin assigned to the address by the council, or else to cut back the ivy that grew around the garden's perimeter. During these several months of making unsuccessful job applications from my desk, which was wide and beautiful, oak, I began to travel by train to the city nearby with some frequency. At first I had a fear of taking the train by myself. I had read a story about a girl who got on a train one night and was found dead weeks later in a forest far away. The local news affiliates

circulated an image of this girl taken from CCTV footage. In the still she was standing on the railway

platform wearing an expression that seemed to me familiar. In short the story about this girl confirmed what I had long suspected, namely that journeys of this kind, taken alone, taken by women, end in self-annihilation.

I began to appreciate being amongst things that were mine only. I cleaned with a puritanical zeal. I found a rug beater and dragged the living room rug into the garden. I scrubbed the floorboards on my hands and knees. I scoured away all evidence of the cottage's past inhabitants, any hint that lives had been lived in the place before mine. Each morning I rose early and walked up a hill. From there I could see the sea, the city and more hills rising gently out of the land. I stood on this hill in the fog, in the sun, in the early morning rain, often in the cloud and more rarely in the snow, and felt triumphant. The vital thing, the absolutely most vital thing, is not to let anybody get to the bottom of you.

The presiding instincts of the university department that engaged me were those of tribalism and aggression. Colleagues disappeared with a regularity I found at first alarming but to which in fact I acclimatised quite rapidly. The sustained and targeted campaigns of harassment affected some more than others, to be sure, their objectives were barely concealed, and yet I knew implicitly that recovering any evidence as to precisely what had happened would have been impossible. Besides, up until then my presence had barely registered, and I had no interest in sticking my head above the proverbial parapet. I sat in my office reading Celan, and at lunchtime ate a cheese sandwich standing by the window, watching my female colleagues furtively cross the quadrangle. At least once a week I witnessed one being waylaid by undergraduates and carried off into a doorway. I knew most of these women by sight, having encountered them either at the monthly staff meetings or else at the department's weekly seminars, both of which, the latter in particular, were exercises in barbarism. Each Wednesday lunchtime the elected member of staff would stand in front of a podium and lecture for an hour upon a subject of his or her choosing, at intervals reaching out a trembling hand for a sip of water. At the end of this hour, my colleagues took turns decimating the speaker, undermining his or her argument and by extension his or her life's work or else and indeed just as often casting aspersions on his or her personal life. After this we held a wine reception. I felt I fitted in quite well, but one day, arriving at my office, I found a note tucked under the door.

Sometimes this genius goes dark and sinks down into the bitter well of his heart.

When Celan jumped to his death on an April day in Paris – incidentally, and perhaps by no small coincidence, my own birthday – he left a biography of Hölderlin lying open on his desk with these words underlined. I had given no reason for anyone to think I was possessed of genius. I had arrived in the post via the careful cultivation of an aura of tedious scholarliness in fact modelled upon a man I once loved and who had treated me as a perennial distraction from his important intellectual work. My most recent involvement, in reality the only person with whom I had been involved since I left the man with the blue and white shirts, ended our relationship via email five days before Christmas, citing as a reason his sadness, which was the result of a series of personal traumas dating back to his childhood, the memories of which he had not, he admitted, altogether recovered. My failure to respond generated a series of further missives that continue to this day in which he outlined, amongst other things, his new lovers' outlook on his cock, which, he wrote, I might recollect curved inwards at an angle of approximately forty degrees. What can I say. A man wants a cipher.

At night I lay awake listening to the police helicopters that had been despatched in great numbers following the disappearance of two girls. The searches brought up nothing in spite of the increased presence of these vehicles, whose spotlights roved through the dark streets and even occasionally came through windows, patches alighting briefly upon a desk, say, or on a person

looking out at the night. By day I sat in my office, filling notebooks with quotations that had no discernible relationship to one another except a pleasing sound. I had difficulty organising my ideas, which I could only catch in a peripheral way. I felt vacuous and degenerate and, when confronted with contact with other people, utterly contentless. I thought more often of the note slipped under my door and watched my colleagues closely at the Wednesday seminars. I wondered whether any of these people had the wherewithal to write out the words in blue ink, to fold the slip of paper and clandestinely to slide it underneath my office door. It seemed beyond them, beyond these mostly enervated people to carry out such an act. I struggled even to imagine, for instance, the Emerson scholar tying his rubbish in a bag and carrying it out to the bin, an activity he must have performed at least once in his life, but which seemed at the same time unlikely to the point of impossibility. And this man, this relatively young scholar of Emerson, was by far the most physically mobile person within the department, so that, if I found it difficult to imagine him writing out a note in blue ink, bending down, and sliding it beneath the office door of a person who was, when one came to it, little more than a stranger, it stretched credulity to a breaking point to even consider the possibility that any one of the other members of the department could have undertaken this same series of actions. At the seminars we stood in knots discussing, more often than not, the deteriorating weather, for instance the early falling darkness or the steadily falling snow, or in warmer seasons, the lashing rain or the debilitating heat, all of which, for various reasons, impeded the work of the department, either as a result of the roads being blocked due to ice or to flooding, causing delays or cancellations to classes and meetings, or else because of the daylight, of which there was too much or not enough. We did not discuss the girls' disappearance, nor the search helicopters, whether because my colleagues were somehow unaware of the goings-on in the city or had decided for some reason that remained unclear to me not to discuss the matter, I was uncertain. As the autumn term wore on, conversation centred more and more on the lengthening nights, which had roused the department to a state of dejection in which they exulted. At the same time, and owing to the unspoken but nevertheless concerted effort by certain agents to cull scholars deemed to be difficult, and to do so, you understand, in a way that would not open them up to legal action of any kind, there were very few women on campus by the time the term ended. It was a fact which went unremarked upon but which was significant in that male members of staff found themselves sitting, astonished, on exam boards, awash in paperwork. One does, I observed, after all and on occasion find oneself at the mercy of the impediments we ourselves have laid down for others.

During those autumn months, my next-door neighbour – who, as a result of his leaving certain items of clothing hanging on the line for several weeks, together with the fact of his walkway being strewn with empty crisp packets, fried chicken containers and flyers advertising takeaways and wellness cafes, brought in, presumably, on the wind (for the city in which we lived was very windy) or alternatively by stray animals, I had for some time suspected of having committed suicide – resurfaced. Each night after his return, as I lay in bed trying to fall asleep, feeling a mute horror, or sometimes a certain tightening of the chest that indicates the incipience of a panic attack, I listened – for the head of my bed was pushed up against the wall we shared – to the neighbour's nocturnal activities. At this stage, his interests seemed primarily to be concerned with home improvement, since I could hear, and indeed had heard, unmistakably, the high whine of a circular saw on the other side of the wall. At times he seemed to be engaged in drilling quantities of holes; at others to be sanding vast slabs of wood. He had, it appeared, a veritable arsenal of power tools at his disposal, which he deployed nightly in the service of some important and secret project. Weeks passed in this manner, and the power tools and the mysterious uses to which they were put, like the search helicopters before them, became a familiar, even integral, part of my night-time routine. I meditated on these mechanical noises, wondering what effect their infiltration into my sleeping mind might have. I had become interested in the idea of rationalising the body, and so I looked hopefully for indications that my psyche was taking on aspects of the machine. I wanted something beyond and far away from the brute fact of the body and the sympathy and repulsion it evoked in turn. I wanted a state of grace. I began, for instance, to have all of my pubic hair waxed off by a woman called Charlotte. By day,

Charlotte waxed women's labia – my own included – and by night, Charlotte stood on the cantilever bridge that stretched over the bay and took photographs of passing cars. She had difficulty understanding what people took from personal relationships, she explained one afternoon as she applied warm wax to my inner thighs. She was more interested in strangers, in the idea of other people. For instance, she said, when people drive in cars late at night, they are, more often than not, driving in their cars alone. Often they are tired, going home from somewhere else, or leaving their homes later than expected to meet some person in need of assistance. In these moments, she continued, their faces seem in a state of suspension – not quite expressionless, no, but with an aspect of hanging there, behind the windscreen, in the space of the car, the windows up or down, the air freshened or unrefreshed, in silence or with music playing. I feel more connected to, more familiar with these people, Charlotte explained, than I do with my own family, many members of which I see on a daily basis. I met Charlotte every five weeks, in a small room at the back of a hair salon near the park. I was interested primarily in the pursuit of a perfect smoothness, a smoothness that was the after-effect of pain and also of a stranger's impersonal intimacy with my body. A smoothness on whose affordances I would skim the surface of the world, no longer mired in the flesh but pure intellect, high and radiant. And so, as I lay in bed at night, listening either to the neighbour's exertions or else to the helicopters, and sometimes to both at once, I attempted to will my body into a state of pure instrumentality. One night, after the weather had turned, the moon hanging cold in the sky like the blade of a knife, I woke up from a dream about a moth extinguishing itself on a windowsill somewhere in Sussex. Through the wall I could hear the neighbour sobbing. Low, and then louder, a raw, animal sound. Why, I heard the neighbour say through his sobs. I listened to him as he went on in this way for some time. Yes, I thought, as I wiggled my toes under the duvet, each of us has in our mouths the incomparable taste of our own lives. We roll it around with our tongues, over and under, above and below. We hold it in or else we spit it out. And sometimes, sometimes we choke on it.



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