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DISTINCTION

THE MAN APPROACHED BRISKLY on the gravel road that led to my cabin and a few others flung along the bay. The wind off the waves snapped his pant legs against him so that the kneecaps shifted like smothered creatures under the fabric. I stood watching for as long as the pain in my back would allow. Then I wedged the door open and lay waiting on the kitchen floor with my feet up on an overturned cardboard box. When he reached my front steps he hesitated briefly to consider the rot and the risks involved before committing to the climb and presenting himself at the open door, his hair glistening under the light bulb.

I didn't move. I invited him to sit at the table beside my partially inflated camping mat, which had been left behind years ago by my wife. He asked, as I knew he would, about the incident—the woman who had been murdered while jogging on the trail a little further down the beach. He set a recording device on the table. I swivelled my head to one side and spoke up at the thing. I told him everything I knew. Almost nothing, that is, and all vaguer than ever. The words surprised me, though, lurching up through my throat in a curious stopped-up stuttering way, so that the man (a detective; I knew this; he had given me his card) was obliged to reposition the device nearer to my mouth, on the floor. I took a breath and tried again.

I remembered the mud on the path and the discarded stick stripped bare by the teeth of a dog or some similar animal. I remembered the miniature bridge and the fresh water passing weakly beneath it to work its way over the sand to the margin of rank seaweed lining the high-tide mark. The seaweed lay abandoned for days at a time before the sea took it back—tiny lettuce-like strips of it heaped ankle-deep and twitching with sand flies that hurled themselves at your legs as you made your way through it. A dead sea lion lay at the tide line, too, lodged for weeks in the sand; its hide had been grazed into raw pink patches and its insides tugged apart by birds who in the end had decided to leave the last entrails alone as they blackened.

I didn't mention these things.

I remembered limping along the path to a point where the sea lion's carcass was well downwind and then leaving the path, treading timidly under the cedar boughs and then over the driftwood to the soft sand and on through the seaweed fringe to the border of stones half-sunk in the flat wet sand at the ocean's edge. Here I could walk in a way that would spare, to a point, the bulged disc in my spine, gingerly raising one hip until the foot lifted off the sand's surface, then letting the whole leg swing pendulum-like from an imaginary point near the base of the ribcage, my attention entirely fixed this way on the pain and its whims, its idiosyncrasies. (The key, I was told, was to keep the body moving, so I did, conscientiously, seven or eight times a day to the beach and back with a grimly determined frequency that I knew must seem absurd to the others I passed, the ones in the houses, who stayed in the houses, who watched through their windows this pained pacing figure again and again, up and back, taking nothing, returning with nothing.)

The next thing was the woman approaching, running or walking, I couldn't remember—or both, perhaps that, first running, then slowing to a walk on seeing me. Or the reverse. She was delicate, picking her way weightlessly through the stones. She had gloves on, the kind with the fingers exposed. When she flipped her hand open to greet me the fingers hung there beside her head as though severed, all white against the grey of the wool and the sky. Then she snapped the hand shut in a parody of efficiency that she acknowledged with a shy, bright, short-lived smile, her head inclined downward so that when she looked up at me briefly the eyebrows arched, nudging little ripples into the forehead like the corrugations that had formed in the sand at our feet where the tide had drawn back.

Startled by that resemblance, I reached down to the sand-furrows after she'd passed, to run the pads of my fingers across them. I hadn't reached so low from such a distance so quickly for weeks, and as I did something shifted. I felt the flesh-muffled clunk of gristle or sinew or bone-on-bone or whatever it was, a flash of pain, and then the familiar fist of muscle around it clenching, the body patiently plotting its punishments.

I lay flat on my back on the sand and saw her now further off at the top of the beach, almost under the fringe of the trees, and we exchanged a few words across that distance, me first or she first, I don't know. Something about managing. She'd manage. We'd manage. She was fallen now too, on her side, in the sand. But that was me in the sand. And her too? It didn't seem likely, but that's how I saw it. And then somehow, simultaneously, the sight

of myself in the bushes beside her. But that couldn't be it. My head had been fogbound as usual that day, an intense pressure and trembling of the brain and the eyeballs along with a shrill and sustained semi-mystical sound like the hum of a tuning fork, all induced by a combination of muscle relaxants and painkillers and shattered sleep. I wasn't feeling much clearer now. But I supposed the details would come back to me, little by little.

I stopped. That was all I could offer. I looked up at the detective sitting there in the chair that I usually thought of as mine (although nothing was mine in any genuine sense—it had all been passed on by my wife, whose mark after all these months still haunted the place in small ways, in the indentations of the couch, in the way the heavy green curtain sagged against itself at the folds). The detective went on. More questions, short ones. What time was it when I saw the woman, when I left, when I returned to the house? What she was wearing? What colour? I was blank on all of this too. I saw yellow somewhere. “Nothing black?” he suggested. I said no, or began to say no, something grey though, the gloves—but I suddenly lost confidence in that too, and said nothing.

His expression changed. He appraised me suspiciously now, like a customs inspector, and jotted down a couple of notes before changing the aim of the questions. What was my age? Even that seemed obscure at this point, but I settled on thirty-eight. What did I do for a living? I did nothing. Mostly I lay on my back. I wanted to explain that I wasn't really living, that his terms didn't apply in my case, but I could tell he wanted something more solid than that. So I told him I'd been teaching literature at the college, before all of this—and by way of explanation I gestured vaguely to the room, to the chaos around me, the mat on the floor, the pillows strategically stacked in strange places for the sake of the head and the spine and the thighs and the feet, the pill bottles around me, some upright, some not, the exploded nylon velcro brace, the multicoloured patchwork of spills on the linoleum beside me, of coffee and orange juice and translucent gel from the burst-open plastic ice packs. During my last class I'd collapsed, almost, or half-collapsed, tottering backward against the blackboard, trying briefly to put a brave face on it by gripping the little aluminum chalk-holding rim in a professorial way, as though simply assuming a new position from which to proceed with my lecture, but then realizing I wouldn't recover this time. Blood rushed from my head, my gut heaved with disgust for the triple dose of relaxants I'd swallowed the previous night. I began to talk, but couldn't find words any longer, or at least couldn't distinguish between them; I saw

ready-formed sentences, whole clusters of words, but had lost the ability to prioritize or arrange them in any sensible order. Finally I heard myself telling the students—those who hadn't stopped coming weeks ago—that we had better call it a day. My voice was distant and muffled, like the sound a wave makes on hitting the shore and recoiling inwardly. And then I was alone.

As now. Almost. The detective began to close his notebook, and I sifted frantically for some nugget of information that might satisfy him, the sequence of events for example, on the beach, before that, after that, the most basic details. But all I could see with any clarity was myself back here in my house at one point, around dark, after meeting her, shifting furiously in short brutal bursts from one spot to another—from the mat to the bed to the mat to the fridge to the kettle to the microwave to the bathroom to the microwave to the mat, and so on, in that familiar repetitive scene of pain and swearing and sweat and vexation that was always such a shocking contrast to the way everything around me, beyond this terrible centre of violence, lay tranquil and gentle and quiet: the garden, the ocean, the driftwood, the sand, the sea lion, the drooping cedar boughs. Along with everything else the shrill, pin-sharp pitch in my head had been intensifying that evening, lasting longer than usual, like a length of fine thread being steadily drawn through the gap at the back of my left eye, the lazy one, with the eyeball that fluttered under the sudden faint weight of my finger on the lid, strangely trusting, not having a choice.

But the rest was confusion. I began to say something about this, but soon mumbled to a stop. The detective retrieved his recording device, touched a button, and slipped it back into his pocket. The fridge clicked, lurched a little, and shook itself out of a hum. Our ears adjusted to the silence, noticing the noise for the first time only now it was gone. The image returned of the woman lying in the sand by the trail with the figure beside her, the one I had thought was myself but who this time seemed different, not me at all, more like a stranger. This was crucial, surely, something at last for the notebook—but it swept through my head like a bat, far too faint, far too fast, and then that too was gone. And then so was my visitor.

That night I dragged the laptop computer to my mat and lay with it balanced against my bent legs to look at the local news site. A picture was posted there now of the dead woman, and of the dead woman's sister addressing reporters, both looking so much alike: the lids of their left eyes sagging a little, obscuring half the pupil in just the same way as mine, and the little corrugations in the foreheads. There was also a description of where the

body had been found—in bushes beside the beachfront trail—and pictures of the investigation in progress: police combing methodically through the undergrowth with rakes and sticks. I imagined the woman being held there with her chin wrenched to one side and her mouth covered by the palm of the killer as I made my way back, as I must have, I supposed, although this was all guesswork still, toward home on the trail only minutes after seeing her, my pant legs perhaps brushing the bushes she breathed in. The last paragraph of the article explained that police were still looking for leads. There was a contact number.

So later, as the bedtime drugs took hold of my head, and after agonizing at length over whether the number on the website or the one on the detective's card would be best, I called the website number to say that the flickering bat-like picture of the woman and the stranger beside her was beginning to come back to me now and that I hoped I had something, however small, that might be useful to them. My voice cracked on the phone. They sent the detective over again the next day, but on seeing his earnest professionally quizzical face again under the light bulb my throat swelled with the pressure of grief and confusion. The picture that had seemed to be coming into focus the night before was now so distorted that the stranger beside the woman appeared more as he had done in the first vision of this scene, more like me, not a stranger at all. I was losing myself. My chin quivered as I apologized that I wasn't feeling clearheaded today, that I really had nothing for him after all. My eyes throbbed. I was severed from everything. I looked down at the mess of unopened mail—mostly bills—on the floor by the front door.

“Am I being monitored?” I asked feebly.

“Pardon me?”

“Well, watched, you know, or whatever they do. As a suspect.”

He let out a puff of air and looked at the ground, then back up. I'd amused him. “No,” he assured me. “Not at all.” And again: “Not at all.” Then with a sort of aborted salute, he trod back down the disintegrating front steps.

On my back again, eyes to the ceiling, I heard the sea at the end of the garden and thought of the way it had moved, and still moved I supposed, in the narrow strait at the base of the bluffs beneath the cemetery where they'd buried my wife twelve years ago, the tides surging against each other in three or four opposing directions around the base of a buoy topped with a surprisingly small green beacon for such a tumultuous place.

After that there were rumours: that the woman's head had been cut off and carried bleeding across the sand and hurled into the sea; that her

family had suffered a history of abuse, with a father who hurt both her and her sister as children in unspeakable ways, and that in spite of the fact that they had both long since grown and escaped from that home they had recently come back, together, to tend to the old man as he died. No one knew why they'd do such a thing. They knew only that the father, confined to his bed, was not one of the suspects in this case. In fact there were no suspects. The police still maintained that the murder may have been random; a freak thing; a stranger from elsewhere. I knew well enough, though, that this wasn't the truth, that they had suspects in mind, being one of them. This seemed more obvious each day.

Overhead, for example, the helicopter continued to sweep across the bay at unpredictable times of day, lingering a little as it passed over my property. At first I would rise from my mat when I heard it approaching and watch from the porch, but recently I'd retreated from there to the window to seem less conspicuous, and then, unable to forget that they might be returning my gaze telescopically, I withdrew completely, to send the message that their chopper didn't capture my attention any more than a passing plane, for example, or a kite, or a bird. Instead I would go back to my mat and lie there, dead still but alert, my eyes shifting across the ceiling, monitoring its course in miniature.

At the trailhead the police had strung up a length of taut yellow tape that shifted a little in the wind like flypaper, catching the sun in its curves, the black letters on it shifting as well so that only two or three words were visible at a time: "Police Line Do," "Not Cross Police," and so on. The policemen shifted also in front of the line, in twos and threes, talking on cellphones, leaning into the windows of their SUV, watching as people approached, but reserving for me a particular kind of attention, so that on the first day my body, already limping, grew clumsier still with self-consciousness as I navigated as unremarkable and casual a loop as possible in the gravel parking lot before sauntering away again with the air of a person who has matters of importance awaiting at home on his desk. But even after they left and took the tape down, I couldn't decide whether it would be best to enter the trail again, and risk returning to the scene of the crime, or to leave it discreetly alone, which might signal a kind of uncommon aversion to the scene. In the absence of the police the suspicion came now from the windows of the houses I passed on my way up the road to the parking lot and back, the eyes in them intent to the point of obsession on whether or not I would finally follow the trail or turn back again, so I was obliged now to alternate, sometimes taking

the trail, sometimes not, manufacturing randomness. A wiry Dalmatian in the yard of one house came lurching toward me howling and salivating at the end of his chain each time I passed, and each time he had to be called back in by his owners. Curtains shifted, blinds carefully opened a crack, and the eyes were on me again, or worse, not on me at all, too distressed to be on me, too horrified.

Two houses short of the parking lot was the dead woman's house, the eyes in the windows of this one of course worst of all. Once I saw the sister, on the telephone, looking through me as she spoke, the mouth moving behind the glass, no sound. She stood with one hand on her hip and the shoulder slumped forward in its socket, looking dislocated, the way my wife's had done when she stood in the same unconsciously confrontational pose during times of anxiety or bewilderment or outrage or betrayal. I thought then of the things I had failed to do for her, and she for me—failing even to leave me a note, for example, a few semi-consoling words, before taking her life. Instead she left only her necklace on the dashboard of the car she had driven to the tunnel a few miles away where the trains bore into the side of the rock face before bursting back into the light seconds later. I still had no idea whether the necklace was a sign of some kind or just one of the dozens of irreversible decisions she would have to have made that day before not making any more. When we had last talked on the phone (I was away in the city for a few days) she had told me again, as she so often did, "I have nothing, it doesn't mean anything, any of it"—and I'd decided that this time it might be more effective not to respond; I said nothing. "I'm sorry," she added to fill out the silence, "It's fine. I'll be fine." And she'd gone on with her day, I suppose, as usual, as though I didn't exist, as though she'd already forgotten me. Since then I had thought every day about following her, about finally having no more decisions to make either, but every day it seemed more inevitable that I'd fail at that too, that I'd find a way to do one crucial thing wrong.

The next time I saw her—the sister—she stood in the yard in the sunshine, in shorts, looking haunted and tragic as she strung up a laundry line, one leg raised off the ground for no obvious reason, and I found myself watching the play of the light on the tendons at the back of her knee, and on the rest of the leg above that, and I resolved not to look again.

Instead I stayed in and the pain took hold. I lay down with the laptop and looked at the dead woman's picture again. I went nowhere for days.

In the early mornings I tried to read things to distract me—a few lines, a few passages, maybe even a chapter before the oblivion that lay in store

for the rest of each day once the pills had been swallowed again, succeeding always in filling the head with their fog but failing to do anything much for the pain, which would force me by lunchtime into fits of pacing and moaning and swearing and slamming and shame and distress at the scenes I was making, the things I was saying, these bitter ridiculous rages. And always by evening when the pain was at its worst I struck back at it, furious at the violence it was doing to me and determined to match it with some of my own. I wrenched my body around, hearing the clunks, the shifts of the spine, the slow spreading of liquid heat from each small, shocked, delicate, unsuspecting spot. I fantasized about cutting into it, simply slicing the back muscle in two like a band of stretched rubber and feeling the ends snapping suddenly free, to spite it, to show it finally how desperate things had become.

When one day the lights went out (something to do with one of the unopened bills by the door, I assumed), I located a candle and lit it and went back to my mat and watched the swelling and shrinking of shadows against the wall. I looked up through the window at the lopsided limb of the cedar tree. I listened to the cries of crows and seagulls and the high-pitched bubble and squeal of my guts from the caustic effect of the pills on the lining. Stars crept up behind the cedar's limb and tilted slowly through the window frame, and when the moon came out I watched that too and remembered the look of its sad faint light on the waves.

A noxious odour began to fill the room. I struggled to my feet, cinched my back brace around me, and tottered outside to determine the source of it. But it wasn't outside. It came from me, from the milk crate beside my mat. I had placed the candle under it, and the flames had licked up at the white plastic, blistering and blackening it. I immersed the whole thing in water in my sink and threw it out on the back lawn. But the smell insisted on itself; it rose and dispersed, filling everything, rising through the cedar branches and up through the lifeless power lines so that the whole valley was suddenly shocked and toxic and tragic. I opened my front door and stood on the step in the stench of it, twitching, inconsolable. Curtains parted in the windows across the street. Birds screamed at the indignity of it and flew from the branches, their cries amplified by the thinning of the blood in my skull, or the thickening of it, I couldn't remember. My tongue tortured itself against the back of my top row of teeth until the tip broke open.

I moved inside and stood shaking by the telephone, wanting to call the police one last time and to clarify everything, to insist finally that I couldn't be scrutinized any longer, implicated any longer, that I had never wanted

the poor sad dead woman dead in the first place and that it was me, more than anyone, who really wanted her back now, or gone now, or one or the other, and that they'd have to accept this at last and leave me alone. I would explain that I wanted all of it over with because it was killing me, because there was nothing in my life now but the eyes on me, and this pain in me, and this equipment all around me for the suppression of pain—the pills and the ice packs and the braces and the pillows and the towels and the rags and the Epsom salts and the stinking drugs and liniments—and that it was all inescapably part of a much broader more brutalizing pain that emanated from everything now, from me, yes, but from them too, from everyone, from the detective's slickly glistening hair and from their boots as they'd stood there smugly guarding the "Do Not Cross" line at the head of the trail and from the curtains as they shifted in the windows and now just from the air, from everywhere, oozing from everything, from even these words I would be speaking to them, from all human sounds, the same black and unbearable pain that was expressible only in ways that made more of it.

I didn't call. I stepped back from the phone. To replace the candle I attached to my forehead a flat-backed camping flashlight with a retractable string that bit into my skin at the scalping line, leaving its imprint long after you lifted it off. I lay down and watched the ghostly blue halogen beam of light darting from wall to wall. The night was impossibly long as I waited for the smell to subside. And as it did, or as I thought it did, there was suddenly the problem of another smell, something more sinister this time, rotting. I shuffled, sniffing, from place to place, sick of these suddenly public exposures of my disorder and decay and decrepitude. I checked the fridge, the laundry bin, the bathroom. Nothing. I walked out to the seaweed on the beach, the disintegrating sea lion, and even forced myself on to the beachside trail and stood sniffing at the edge of the patch of beaten-down undergrowth where the slain woman had been found, half-suspecting that a part of her might have been left behind. But there was no odour anywhere nearly as rank as the one closer to home. I was back in the front yard of my house with my nose in the garbage bins when another possibility occurred to me: my own innards, something eroded or ulcerated in there. I cupped my mouth and nose in my palm and breathed into it. Again there was nothing there, nothing worse than the usual faint sickly medicinal smell from the pills, the scent of a doctor's office. Then it all became clear as a third option presented itself. The sister, of course, and her dying father. To settle this question at last, to shift the blame for this stench from me to another location so that I might finally be able to

sleep, I crept up the road to her driveway and approached the garbage bins there, sniffing for some sign of the old man's illness: incontinence perhaps, or some other by-product of dying. As I crouched over the first bin I crossed into the orbit of her safety light sensor. There was a click of the switch on the wall above and a tearing of velcro at my waist, and I froze there, caught in the unforgiving beam, the loose end of my back brace dangling.

She came to the door and watched me the way you would an animal—a raccoon or a skunk.

"I'm sorry," I said, referring only to what was obviously in front of her now, this preposterous man leaning over her garbage under the spotlight. And that seemed to be it, suddenly, that tiny phrase capturing everything I could possibly say about any of this. But when she said nothing my words lost their nerve, their independence, and dribbled stupidly into three more: "For your loss."

"Pardon me?"

I repeated myself and dribbled still further on in a rush of embarrassment. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry, for your loss, and for not being able to offer any more help to anyone, to the police, or to you." Her lower eyelid fluttered twice and was still. Her gaze rested a little above my own, squinting slightly, and I understood that the flashlight was still strapped to my forehead. It was no longer dark; the first faint wash of daylight was seeping its way into everything. I took the flashlight off, and knew as I did that the string's imprint would remain there etched into the skin. I went on: "I've tried to remember what happened. I can't. It's my fault. I'm sorry."

Her brow buckled into creases of strain and confusion, and she echoed me. "I'm sorry, I don't understand. Do I know you?"

It was the shock, I supposed, so I reminded her patiently, buying her time. I explained that I was the one just a few doors down, the one the police had been talking to.

But for her it was not a reminder. She peered down the road into the darkness. "Which house is yours?"

"Well it's not really mine," I said. "It belonged to my wife—my wife's parents, I mean. They died, and they left it to her. And then she died."

"Oh," she said, and a glimmer of something came back to her faintly, the death of the woman a few houses down. "Years ago, was it?"

"Yes."

"I thought the place was empty now."

"No."

And then it seemed there was nothing to say. I patted softly at the dangling end of my brace and turned to go, preparing to fade once more down the road into anonymity, when a cry came from inside the sister's house. She dashed in and came back. "It's my father. He fell." Needing me now.

As I followed her into the bedroom I prepared for the abusive barking and clawing and grasping of this man who had subjected his children to so much suffering, and who had now lost so much himself so suddenly, and who was about to lose even that loss. There were flowers and a can of disinfectant spray on the dresser. There was the faintest trace of a scent of some kind, but nothing at all like the smell I'd sought out in her garbage bins, where there had also turned out to be nothing. So again it seemed clear it was coming from me; I'd need to investigate again once I got home. In the middle of the room was an iron bed with a loose upright restraining bar leaning against one corner. She began circling the bed and efficiently fixing the sheets where they had torn away from the mattress, snapping the elasticized edges in place at the corners. I admired that swiftness, that purpose. I stepped forward to help with the last corner by slackening one of the others a little, as though this was my role, to be freeing the sheet. The brace cut in between hips and ribs as I bent, splitting me, stopping the breath. She swept her hand across the sheet to flatten it, and then with a flustered desperate gesture conjured up the man I'd not seen yet, lying flat on the floor beside the bed where he'd fallen. He wore only a diaper and a thin white T-shirt stained at the neck and the chest like a bib. The fabric exposed the indentations between his ribs and sagged where the belly sank away beneath it. His knees bulged enormously half way down the wasted legs, and his face was fixed toward the ceiling, the eyes in it rolling with an incongruous comic effect from side to side and up and down, slowly but alert, taking his visitors in. The neck moved also a little, with the larynx and the tendons beneath it shifting under the skin.

"He's broken the bar now," she said. "We need to lift him back up." She put a hand through her hair and then back on her hip with the shoulder thrust forward in its socket in that oddly dislocated way. She stepped over her father's body and dropped athletically into a crouch beside it, cupping the head in one hand and working the other hand under the shoulders. She looked up at me rapidly, twice, bewildered to find that I might need instructions from here. Then she realized that wasn't the case—that I knew what to do, but could not, would not. Impatiently she waved me away: "Never mind."

I didn't go home. I went on up the road, toward the trail. It was almost day now, and there were the sounds of creatures shifting in the bushes and the

trees. I passed the houses. The curtains were still, the blinds motionless too. The salivating Dalmatian lay mutely in its kennel, the chain slack. I came to the head of the trail, tightened my brace, and went in. My tongue darted up with its raw spot to the back of my teeth as I approached that flattened patch of undergrowth, so I let my lower jaw fall, allowing the hurt thing to hang quivering in the open space, touching nothing, until I had passed the place by. The blood pulsed under the thin strained skin at my temple and I felt for the zigzag vein with my fingers, tracing the line of it, a single raised ripple. As I passed through the border of trees and out onto the beach, the sand felt unusually soft underfoot, as though it felt the weight of me less fully than before. Tiny birds rose and fell with their chests puffed up, hopping pointlessly between the branches of a scraggly bush, intent on this odd indecipherable task and shifting their heads now and then to one side to look at me, or through me, without curiosity, without expectation. I nudged my way through the wet mess of seaweed and on to the portion of firm damp sand at the water's edge with its pattern of ridges, curbing the urge to reach down and touch them again. Instead I drew one foot over the ridges to obliterate them, but the muscle fluttered at the base of my spine to remind me of the violence it was capable of. I stopped and stood back and looked up into the oily eyes of a seal bobbing passively offshore, expressionless. A grey mist infiltrated the scene, blurring the lines between water, sky, the shape of a ship, and the mountains on the far shore. Seagulls flew through the dampness and disappeared, sucked away into nothing, discernible only by the faint rushing sound of their wings as they skimmed overhead. When I turned to look back at the tree line the whole scene was wiped clean, effaced by the morning fog, just as I'd been effaced from the woman's thoughts that day when we met on the beach and she'd turned to another.

I remembered now that there was nothing to look at. The scene replayed itself against the damp grey backdrop. The raised glove, the snapping open and shut of the fingers, the corrugated forehead. Then something new, a discussion, her telling me why she was running, that she was looking for someone who'd surely forget their way home—a child perhaps, or an animal. Then her moving off and me reaching down to the ridges; the flash of pain; my body flopping onto the sand. And after that the absurd picture of her, too, tripped up, flat on the sand at the tree-line, calling back to me across the width of the beach: no I wasn't to worry, she'd manage. And then the other figure appearing beside her, the one who had seemed to be me, but who couldn't be me, reaching down to help her up, and she accepting his help in place of

mine, rather than mine, but in all this confusion the feeling that I was helping her up myself. And her words had been so much like those of my wife, who'd forgotten me too, for whom I'd simply dissolved. After my wife had gone I had been reassured repeatedly by friends of my own irrelevance, of the fact that there was nothing I could have done, that her decision had already been made, and that whatever action I might have taken—if I'd known, if I'd thought—would not have had any impact at all. And then I had watched that woman being lifted up and guided away by the hand at her elbow.

Now I stood in the spot where I'd fallen before, watched but not watched by the birds at the tree-line and the seal behind me. I overheard myself saying again to the sister, "I'm sorry for your loss"—how ridiculous that had sounded, how hackneyed, like the detective producing his card, but how sensible also, accounting for all the little things lost: like the ones you were asked to remember, for example, or the sea, the sky, the shape of the ship, the distinctions between them, and between me now and everything here in the mist.

I faced down-shore toward the houses, invisible, they to me, me to them, and wondered whether the sister, the one who had asked for my help, had managed to get that old body back into its bed.