

FICTION

And

N. E. Houston

The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two by two, necessarye coniunction,

—T. S. Eliot

Amos enjoyed her company, but he felt lost. Despite the many times they had walked across campus together, he still felt lost. The fog had set in heavy over by the Carillon Tower, screaming like someone falling off the overpass into the canal and drowning, someone who'd been walking atop the overpass wall and had slipped in the fog. He wanted to go down into the water and grab the man out, but what if he couldn't get back up the bank and perished too? The first thing was to get across the parking lot, and to do that he had to cross the road. No cars hit him, but he almost collapsed in the parking lot, the fog pressed so heavily on him. It lay darkly on his eyes, willing him to sleep—but he kept moving forward till he came to the stairs by the fountain in front of the administration building and grasped firmly the handrailing. Greenish white light flashed in the distance, probably copy machines in the library, great and spacious—the fog was lifting. He saw people

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standing in windows, actually in the windows—freshmen, probably, standing on the sills, palms planted on either side of the window casing—giant X's. But what were they doing? Hazing had been abolished for years at BYU. In one flash he saw her, her red hair and long legs, very long, lost in the fog, standing by the Tree of Knowledge, the six cement slabs standing on end in a row, joined by two cement dowels through the center. The two end slabs looked like S's facing opposite directions. The center slabs grew progressively straighter. A menorah?

She beckoned impatiently. Flashes from the copy machines lit up her smooth, full cheeks, her nose, the loose bun in her reddish hair. "I'm sorry," he said, then shouted, "I'm sorry." Loud enough to travel a hundred yards, again, "I'm sorry. I was just figuring out how to describe that sculpture." The people in the windows laughed and pointed at him, their long bony fingers held up along the line of sight of their red eyeballs—terribly red: no lids, no brows or lashes, no sleep. He realized that he was bent slightly, his hands crossed in front, protecting his vitals. They were right to mock. He hadn't stopped to puzzle over the sculpture; he had stopped because he didn't want to take her hand.

And in the periphery of his vision he could see a body floating in the fountain. He should help this person, pull him out, or her—no chance of his own drowning here. But they kept laughing and pointing at him.

O.K.! I don't want to take her hand because I'm married. But if I tell her that, she'll be terribly hurt. And I've met her father, haven't I?

He put his arm around his wife, sleeping on her side, and kissed her back. He shivered. His mouth was dry and it hurt. Beneath his lower lip inside a canker was growing daily larger. He looked at the clock. Five A.M. He got out of bed and went to the kitchen for some water—too much too quickly in a too-dry mouth. On the table lay the bottle of Lysine Beth had brought home. He found some orange juice and swallowed some with a tablet. His mouth felt less dry.

Sonnets from the Portuguese was lying on the kitchen table. Alfred was learning how to count, and Beth had probably been counting the ways she loved him. He picked up the volume idly and opened to her bookmark. Lines in the second sonnet were lightly marked.

and laid the curse

So darkly on my eyelids as to amerce
My sight from seeing thee,—that if I had died,
The death-weights, placed there, would have signified
Less absolute exclusion. "Nay" is worse
From God than from all others, O my friend!

A strong image. Amos was glad she had marked the lines lightly. A frightening image. He didn't like his books marked up. He wondered why she had marked them. Relief Society lesson? No. As if she'd read his dream before, he'd had it, or when he'd had it before, and was interpreting it for him. Familiar, that thought, as if he'd dreamt she could read his dreams.

"Dammit, Beth. Stop that." He started at the sound of his voice. Had she heard? He reached nonchalantly across the table and parted the curtain slightly. No, Beth, I didn't say anything, Beth, just looking out the window, Beth. Think this fog'll ever lift? How many days now, Beth? Well, sure, I'm keeping count.

No neighbors stood in their windows mocking his surreptitious glances. He had felt the weight of the fog on his skin. Cold. Very cold on his eyes. So lost. He hadn't expected to see the library again. He looked at the bottle of Lysine, at the book, waiting for him to wake from a dream they were sure he'd had before.

She was very innocent, pure. He didn't want to hurt her, but he couldn't keep seeing her.

"If you ever do anything like that to me, there's no coming back. It's over. Finished, Mister. Just forget it!" Beth had given him a very hard look. "Things like that don't just happen. People make choices."

Their first big argument, that. About a friend who'd committed adultery and divorce. He'd thought it an abstract discussion, she a defense.

Oh, Beth, is that what you thought I was doing? He looked at his wife sleeping and replied to the Beth-voice in his mind. I wasn't doing that, Beth. It was you, your vehemence. How easily you scorn people. What if she wrote him off like that?

That's right, Amos, switch to third person. That's what I like about you. You're so detached.

He didn't want to be conducting this silent argument. He wanted to be in bed in his wife's arms. Beth. A beautiful name. It meant "house." Beth-Lechem, the House of Bread. Second letter of the alphabet. Aleph, Beth, Gimel, Daleth. Aleph, the beginning. Beroshit, the beginning of creation. Then Beth. Then a house.

He wanted to bend over and kiss her softly, feel her arms around him, pass his fingers over her body, feel her shiver in his arms—join her.

But she didn't like being wakened. He shivered. He had felt so relieved in the dream when the fog lifted. He could feel the pavement under his feet, the girl's hand reaching for his if he climbed back in bed. Inevitable—somehow.

He bent down and kissed Beth on the cheek. "Come back to bed,

Amos," she muttered.

Damn, you sleep so lightly, he thought, crawling into bed. He had trained himself to wake up at slight noises, because he could get back to sleep easily and she couldn't.

As if merely thinking about the next sound he would hear brought the sound into being, Alfred started crying.

The baby who looked so beautiful asleep looked disheveled and disoriented awake. "Well, Alfred, you've done a noble job here." Amos threw the sheet, pajamas, undershirt, and blanket, all of them wet, on the floor. He took Alfred into the bathroom, always amazed at how much more this baby could make when he had already made a flood. When Alfred had finished peeing, he said, "Mi. Ba-ba."

"You want some milk, huh? Well, I'll give you a whole ba-ba, Fred, but let's get another diaper first."

He changed Alfred, got a small bottle from the fridge, and put his son down on the bedroom floor. "Drink this while I make up your crib."

Al, Alf, Fred, Red, Ed—a very mutable name. He wondered how many names the baby would grow up with.

Pulling the corners of the sheet down over the mattress, he said, "Can a name be falsified, Alfred?" He picked up his son and kissed him. "I love you, Alfred. Don't wake up till after I've gone to school. 9:00 will be good. Your mother needs the sleep, and I need to think about the problems with falsification. Big paper due, you know. Whatever possessed me to read the positivists this semester?" Another kiss. "I'll kiss you again if you promise not to become a philosopher."

He tucked the baby in and kissed him, feeling again the foreboding that made his skin prickle. How much could a thing change and still be what it was? Could you state beforehand the conditions under which it would cease being what it was?

Amos sang softly as he headed back to the bedroom, "For unto us, a son is given."

Beth stirred. "Go to sleep, Amos. How can I sleep when you're tossing and turning all over the place and jumping in and out of bed?"

"I'm sorry. I forget what a light sleeper you are. I can fall asleep anywhere."

"Amos, we've been married for three years. If you'd just make that fact important, you'd remember it."

"Speaking of three years ago, Beth, you remember that terrible fight we had, about the Davidsons?"

"I do. I was so angry at the way you harangued all the way across campus that I wouldn't let you come into my apartment."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. I just—" he paused.

“You were certainly strident.”

Beth had been pretty strident too. “I guess. I get this horrible feeling sometimes that I could end up like that. I don’t know why because I have no heart for that kind of thing. Just foreboding, maybe, and a certain kind of compassion.” He paused. “It’s thoroughly repugnant to me.” His voice trailed off.

“Amos, did you wake me up just to apologize? You defend yourself against too many possibilities, Amos,” she put an arm around his shoulder and kissed him. “You think too much. Now snuggle up and fall asleep. *Please* fall asleep.”

“It’s just that there are pressures involved, and our responsibility is not to judge those who fall into . . . who sin.”

“I worry about the way you talk, sometimes . . . like you don’t want people to have to be responsible for their actions. Maybe you just don’t want to be responsible for your own.”

“I don’t think making people responsible necessarily means punishing them.”

Beth sighed. “I love you, Amos, but I’m too tired to argue right now, or discuss, or whatever.”

“Good night, Beth. I love you, too.”

Foreboding and a certain sense of compassion. What had he meant? Always wondering, “What if I were in that position?” Prone? “No, I didn’t mean—” Prone to what? That was the question. There was something about the naked male body—especially very skinny men like himself—almost too ludicrous to be prone to anything. To think of any couple he knew and loved prone together in the altogether was too embarrassing altogether. The wide-screen exposure of flesh didn’t make it any less so. He supposed this insistent embarrassment was proper; sex was too intimate a con-joining to be thought of recklessly.

“I like it hyphenated that way,” Beth had said. “I mean don’t you think it’s just a big con sometimes? All the violins, the soft flutes, and no one says anything about the messy sheets or what to do with the condom—”

“Con-dom?”

“Yeah, that’s part of the con, too. You never see some guy withdrawing erect because it loses its seal otherwise.”

“I would hope not. You can get in a lot of trouble peeking in people’s bedroom windows, especially to the accompaniment of violins and soft flutes. Actually,” he paused, “I don’t think the flute goes soft.”

“Amos!”

“Well, you’re the one who brought it up.”

“I don’t control your body.”

“You think I rise for just any lady? Such a gentleman.”

“Welcome to the Bedroom Comedy Hour, ladies and gentlemen. I mean, look, if sex were music, if it *were*, it wouldn’t be Mozart or Beethoven or the Music of the Spheres, it would be PDQ Bach.”

“You mean because it’s over pretty damn quick?” he’d said, pulling her closer.

“You said it, Amos, not me,” drawing apart slightly. “I can’t control what your body does.”

Amos looked at her asleep now. “I can’t control what your body does.” That was a refrain of hers. Said originally to tease him, to acknowledge the effects of physical love on the body—a verbal kiss. He remembered the Bedroom Comedy Hour because it was one of their few memorable times of love-making after Alfred’s birth.

Alfred. Alfred and the Big Change. How’s that for a bedtime story, Red, old boy?

The Bedroom Comedy Hour, one of those times when the cold between them had melted and the only fog in the room was the heat of their bodies condensed on the window panes. Now the fog pressed in on those panes like a death-weight, a girl waiting in the fog.

Foreboding. Can you guarantee the statement, “I will not adulterate my marriage?” Or falsify it? Maybe that’s a way to get into my paper. I will never again take two philosophy classes in the same semester. If the positivists are right and you can’t make a truth-claim unless you can state in advance the point at which you would say, for example, “Well, given these conditions God no longer exists,” how would you falsify the statement, “I will be faithful always”? By beginning to think about the conditions in which you would be unfaithful? By inventing those conditions? He shuddered.

Still, he thought he was becoming a better partner.

He got out of bed, scribbled a note, and put it with his school books. He climbed back into bed. 5:30. He had to get up at 7:00. He kissed the back of Beth’s neck; she stirred, said nothing, but he remembered her earlier words. He fell asleep, pushed the snooze button when the alarm went off at 7:00 and again at 7:10, wondering if he could really afford another ten minutes. He got out of bed.

Monday morning. He looked out the living room window to a valley still full of gritty fog. Another weekend gone. He hadn’t done anything, was still tired, and wouldn’t be home till eight or nine tonight.

What the valley needed was a good wind to blow away the dirt and the fog, to bring rain. What he wanted, now, was to lie between Beth’s arms, lick her breasts, and draw his fingers up her back. “Don’t you feel

it all over your body?" she would say. "Don't men, I mean—all just in one place? Oooh," she would say on a descending scale, "I feel sorry for . . . Oooh" (scale ascending). But she wouldn't wake up this morning till after he got to school.

As he closed the bathroom door, took off his garments, and turned on the shower, Amos thought about the pause in that line, "For unto us, a son is given." In the pause after Alfred's birth, things had begun to change, begun as Beth's body recovered from a difficult birth, to change. Begun to change as her body recovered its rhythms and added the rhythm of Alfred's pumping her milk into his body, the rhythm of his heart pumping blood to his hands and legs, pumping him around the apartment to his father's books, to the clacking keys of his father's typewriter, where he would slap his hands over several keys at once till Amos stopped unjamming them, stopped trying to type with one hand while holding Alfred's in the other, stopped trying to guide Alfred's fingers to particular keys, and took him in his arms with a bottle, holding him close, rocking him into that wonderful moment when his breathing changed, his body relaxed, and his eyes stayed closed as Amos put him back in the crib. Amos tested the water, stepped into the shower thinking, you should (strong moral should) desire time with your child more than with your typewriter, even if he can't bring you a degree, even if he brings you interruption. Interruption has its own rhythm—erratic, sporadic—erotic, or not.

"Of course children get jealous of a new baby, Amos. Look at what happened when Alfred was born and you didn't get as much of my attention as you wanted."

"Beth, it's as if you don't need me. As if you get everything you need from Alfred."

"Oh, honey," caressing his head, "I know. I don't want it to be that way." She'd kept caressing his head, said nothing more.

Too painful to pursue. Of course he wanted her intimacy; who else could laugh at the image of PDQ Bach playing the Music of the Spheres on the left-handed sewer flute? "If sex is like that for you," he'd said, "why are you so solemn?"

"You mean during?" She gave a small sigh, more an exhalation perhaps. "When you make love to me I want to concentrate on the sensations going through my body, on the fact of our union, of your being there. There is something deeply satisfying about two bodies working in rhythm with each other." Like the rhythm of soaping up, head, shoulders, knees and toes, not to mention the naughty bits. Careful not to slip with your feet soaped up.

Amos wondered if she knew she was talking about herself and

Alfred. Damn Freud. He had made it impossible to make such an observation without making it in oedipal terms. It was just—there was something intensely sexual about a woman nursing a baby, something that tapped directly into the streams of human being.

“That’s not sexual, Amos. It’s the kind of intimate physical contact people need to grow, the kind babies die without, the kind of touching that tells us we’re loved. That’s not sex, Amos. That’s not in and out in ten minutes and see you next time.

“Look, I’m sorry, Amos, but—we need to talk. I love you so much, yet I feel sometimes like you’re making love to me, but that’s all, like I’m not somehow involved in what you’re receiving. Does that make any sense?” She paused.

Shampoo. This has got to last until the first paycheck in January. “I” (the syllable becoming a sigh) “know this is hard to hear, but you need to know why I’m so reluctant to make love. It’s not that I don’t want you. Sometimes when you’re away I want you so bad I can almost taste—” She started laughing and said, “Get that look off your face. You know I don’t mean it that way. You know I don’t go in for—”

And the moment of seriousness had passed as Amos said, “You don’t go in at all, Beth. That’s like Emily Dickinson saying, ‘Wild nights—Wild nights—Were I but moored in thee tonight,’ dashes and all.”

“Well,” she said, cupping his head in her hands, moving his lips toward hers, “every ship needs safe harbor.”

Rinse. Coldy boldy. My father called it that when we used to shower together. A cold rinse at the end. And I’ve been doing it what, seventeen, eighteen years? A ritual because my father taught me. Alfred, I took you in my arms when you could finally support your head. I held you securely and soaped you up, then put the smallest drop from that ounce of shampoo the hospital gave us and, careful of your soft spot, rubbed it into your hair, fine and light and blond. Then I tilted you back to rinse—so the water wouldn’t run in your eyes—then handed you out to your mother, towel in arms, to wrap and rock and dry you, diaper you and nurse. That was safe harbor for you, Alfred. A pipe ran through the bathroom, the cold water pipe, I guess, and all these drops used to condense on it. She didn’t want you to get dripped on. We haven’t been as close since you were born, Beth and me. You and me, either. I’m sorry about that. I spend all our time together trying to keep you out of my typewriter or my books.

He threw his towel over the shower curtain rod and began to shave. You’re right, Beth. I could never write about what sex is like with you. The things we say to each other, the touching in fine and private places;

that can't be conveyed outside the bounds of our own sheets. I guess that's part of the chastity of having no sexual intercourse except with your husband or wife. *Intercourse* is a fascinating word; it means both *discourse* and *copulation*. Our intercourse has been interrupted, Beth. And without intercourse . . . Not only can I not share it with anyone else, I can't even talk to you—"Shut up," he said to the mirror. Have I been saying any of this out loud? How long has it been, Beth . . . three weeks? No, I'm not keeping count, honey. "It's just that . . .," he muttered. "Shut up," he said. "Just shut up. Just *shut* up." He looked around guiltily.

He went into the kitchen, got a bowl of cereal, took it into the living room, blessed it at the coffee table, and took a mouthful. Then he lifted his typewriter into its case and snapped it shut so Alfred couldn't play with it. Hmm, another note:

That child at Socrates' trial who couldn't walk, it wasn't crippled. It was a baby! The famous abhorrer of the human body became a new father at 70?

Might work nicely for his other paper. He smiled; Alfred wasn't the only one who interrupted his typing. One night last May Beth had come into the living room, dishtowel over her shoulder, while he was typing again after a frustrating half-hour of begging (wasn't that fore-play?) his words to do something dazzling (or even moderately intelligent) on the page before him. "Amos, remember a while back when you were explaining the concept of being toward, of directedness, what a hard concept it was for you? Well," she hesitated, then continued, "you're not being toward us." She paused. (Another mouthful of cereal.) "You're directed somewhere else." (Said quickly, followed by a long pause and a slow reiteration.) "You're directed somewhere else."

She was uncanny. Did she just sense the right moment when he couldn't say, "Beth, I've just gotten back on track with this paper. I can't talk for a few minutes," without proving her point?

"Beth, I get up in the middle of the night to change Alfred's diaper so you don't have—"

"It's not my job, Amos. It's not a favor; it's something fathers are supposed to—"

"So you don't have to. Because I love you."

"Amos—I appreciate that, but Alfred thinks you're just the diaper service." She paused, looking at him. "Sometimes I feel you do these things at night so you don't have to spend time with us during the day." (Eat. Don't stop to think about it.)

"Beth, I'm in school. I'm sorry, but I've got so—"

“Well, I’m sorry, Amos, I’m sorry too. I’m really sorry, but how long are you going to be in school? How long? How long do I subsist on afternoon phone calls while you’re gone till seven or eight at night?—and that’s early. Sometimes I want you so much in the afternoon—or the evening. Instead I’m here all day with the baby and his diapers, being tired. And you come home and start grabbing at me. You come home late, you’re home ten minutes, and it’s ‘Flop on your back, woman.’ No time to talk, or even cuddle on the couch, or enjoy a meal. No time to even be married—”

Blinking rapidly, she came round the coffee table and sat next to him on the couch. “Now you can’t hide behind your typewriter, because I’m here too. We need to talk.” Pause, looking at him. “Amos, you’ve got another year till you graduate. Then two years for your master’s, and what, another three for your doctorate? And then what, Amos? Are you going to teach, is that it? Are you going to teach for the next thirty or forty years?” (He glanced at the clock. You should allow yourself more time. You’re going to be late unless you leave in the next few minutes.)

Amos hadn’t known what to say. “Yes. I want to teach . . . and write,” he added softly. “Stories, Beth. I want to write stories.” That was something he couldn’t easily talk to Beth about. He remembered the way he had felt in the dream, knowing he should tell the girl, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t take your hand. I have a wife, I can’t do it, I just can’t,’ knowing he should slide down the bank and help the man who was drowning, but he lacked the courage. He lacked the courage to declare a plan, even as he worked toward it, confident it would work out.

“Don’t you see, Amos, you’re always going to be in school.” A tear began its way down her cheek. He kissed the cheek, and wiped the tear. (Another mouthful. You can do it, Alfred.)

“You’ve got to work it out, honey,” she had said. “You can’t keep using school as an excuse to stay away from me. You took vows, honey.” (It’s not fair bringing up this particular memory when I’m about to be late for class again.) “We knelt in the temple, Amos, and took vows across the altar to support each other,” she said, crying again. “And you don’t. Amos, you don’t,” she sucked in breath, “support me.” He held her tighter.

Beth had stopped crying, and after a while had begun to kiss him, and they had made love there on the couch and had fallen asleep. Waking later, Beth said, “I love you,” as they were climbing into bed. “I love you, Amos, but I don’t think we’ve solved anything just now. This is important, honey, or you’re going to wake up one morning and say, ‘Where did it all go? My wife, my family, what happened?’” (Last bite.

Drink your milk.)

"Do you know what your little boy did today? I had a compass out to draw him a nice big circle, and he picked that compass up and said, 'Ae. Ae,' he said, then, 'Daddy,' pointing at the Ae. Our son knows that things are like each other, Amos, and he knows that your name is like the sound it starts with. Don't you want to be here for things like that?"

Running through the cold dirt-sodden fog today was not like going to school in the May sunshine that next morning after she had pulled him close, kissed him hard, and fingered his pants like the scale on a recorder. "Hurry home from school, Mr. Left-handed Sewer Flute."

"Another concert so soon? Goodness."

"Don't be vulgar—just hurry home," and she had done it again.

"It is *very* provoking," said Humpty Dumpty—"

"Especially when everyone is going to notice," she said, touching him again.

"I'm riding my bike. I'll have a lap."

And when he had come home she was wearing a cravat. What was so marvelous about Beth was that she knew what his quotes meant, knew his sense of humor, knew how provoked Humpty Dumpty had become there in Wonderland that Alice couldn't tell the difference between a belt and a cravat. "Humpty omelet, for later," Beth had said, opening her loose robe to him, "Come on."

He heard the morning trumpet calling on campus a mile away. Ten minutes till class time.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, I just got home. Not even ten minutes. We need a little time to just talk or eat something or cuddle up on the couch—"

All across campus thousands of students would be stopping

"God! Amos!" cracking like a whip the Maker's name, and placing their hands on their hearts,

Amos flinched. This woman, so devout, or hurrying into nearby buildings.

"You certainly do know how to ruin an evening."

And he heard through the dawn's gritty fog the first strains of what Francis Scott Key had strained all night to see, and what those farther away than ten feet from the flagpole probably couldn't see this morning.

"I'm sorry. I just, it's hot, and I'm all sweaty, and," and he had actually felt a bit irritated when she pulled him in the door, "and—"

"Then I suggest you take a shower. And make it cold. Go on—maybe it'll put you in a better mood. Damn. And I had it planned so nice."

Ten minutes later she had stepped into the shower. "I decided not to let *your* perverse desire to feed me my own words ruin my evening. Put this on, and turn up the warm."

"In the shower?"

"Mmm. It's the water, you know."

And they had dried each other off, and all evening had lain between clean May sheets and made love again and woken up to Fred in the middle of the night and gotten him back to sleep remarkably fast and made love again, the first time since their honeymoon they had spent such a co-operant night, first time in three years—

Another damned weekend gone. And no studying done. Again.

And it was Monday.

He set the book down, though he couldn't afford to squander the Monday time. The library was not a comfortable place to sleep. He put his Monday coat down on the Monday afternoon desk and continued his afternoon period of Monday not-studying—head Monday down on the coat.

The dry spells always ended like that, suddenly, always giving him the sense that things were back to normal, their problems solved. And thus he fell asleep.

He woke up, neck aching, rows and rows of books waiting to open themselves to him. To co-operate with him. That was a hell of a word to use with reference to your wife. It had been ruined by too many monocled movie-Nazis. He put his head back down.

He had to go to work in an hour, had to stay awake and study. Damn canker sore; he took a Lysine.

He took his book and lunch out into the west stairwell, where he could look out on the campus and think about Socrates, the hard-thinking drinker. There was a note in his lunch with a picture—Beth's imitation of a child's drawing of Alfred, decorated with some of Alfred's crayon slashes and an "Ed loves Daddy," written in crayon. He ate some casserole. "I *like* it cold," he said to the questioning Beth-voice hovering just at the edge of hearing.

He looked at the people walking through the fog past the library to their classes, their breath with the breath of a thousand automobiles hanging inverted in the air till the air they breathed out would be the air they breathed in, or until the wind came and blew it away, or the rain fell, absorbing the acid in the air to wash ponds and grass, fish, trees, and bronze, to wash the twelve-foot bronze Indian standing on the lawn surveying the fog, surely cold, wearing only a loincloth. "A definite dress standards violation," Beth had said. "I think we ought to

write a letter to the editor.”

“He’s got a pipe too,” Amos had said. “Not a good example to impressionable freshmen.”

When they were courting, Beth had had some freshman roommates who used to shout out the upstairs window, “Let’s get naked,” and then slide to the floor giggling. Looking at the naked buttocks of the bronze Indian, it struck him how daring they must have felt, and how innocent they were to take such pleasure in that kind of daring. Let’s get naked is the altar call of marriage, he thought.

How innocent he and Beth that first night, how vulnerable and open to each other. He had told her once his fear of dogs, “especially those big ones about yea high, that come up and start sniffing your crotch, nuzzling and pushing, like they’re going to heave you up in the air. I’m just waiting for one of those to reach over and bite, crunch ‘em right off.” She had laughed and assured him that wouldn’t happen, dogs didn’t do that, but he soon regretted telling her. As her bitterness towards him increased, she threw his fear back at him as if it were a moral failing. “My God, man, you are always trying to protect yourself, always trying to cover those gonads. You’ve got to take chances, you’ve got to make choices and live with the consequences; we were not meant to live comfortable, easy lives.”

How sweet and vulnerable that first night. Now there was an edge of hardness, even at their most intimate moments. That hurt Beth, too. It was a hell of a thing to be afraid of your wife (Beth’s words), but he couldn’t tell her how he felt because she wouldn’t give to him liberally and upbraid not.

He saw a woman too great with child and books making her way up the ramp out of the fog toward the library. Beth’s growing stomach, how beautiful he remembered it. How he had kissed it and recited:

Three things there are more beautiful
 Than any man could wish to see:
 The first it is a full-rigged ship
 Sailing with all her sails set free;
 The second, when the wind and sun
 Are playing in a field of corn;
 The third, a woman, young and fair,
 Showing her child before it is born.

“You like that, Baby? That’s by a fellow named W. H. Davies. I’ll read you lots of poems when you come out.”

The baby gave a tremendous kick. Three, in fact.

"He's just like John the Baptist leaping for joy in his mother's womb," Beth said with some awe.

Amos, though he had felt the baby kick many times, felt the same awe and had to swallow before he could say anything. After a moment, "What if it's a girl?"

"O.K., Salome dancing."

He shook his head. "Amos used to read poetry to Alfred before he was born," Beth had told her mother. "So when Amos came back to the hospital in the afternoon, after we'd all had a chance to rest up, and said, 'Hello, Baby. Hello, Alfred,' that baby focused right in on him. Followed his voice everywhere."

Amos hadn't even noticed. That Beth cared so much to observe and study things like that was another reason he loved her. One day when he came home she had made a mobile for Alfred's crib: several discs of heavy white paper, faces drawn on two, a woman's with a curving black patch reminiscent of the yin (or yang) for hair, circles for eyes and glasses, then a nose and mouth. A man's face done much the same way, in black magic marker and white space, was clearly his. He was amazed at how essentially right the almost abstract drawings were. "Newborns like things with strong contrast," Beth said. "Simple shapes with strong contrast. They can really focus on those. I thought it might make him feel secure to look at his parents, too."

Looking at the fog, feeling the canker sore under his lip, he felt considerably less than secure. What had Beth said last May watching him hunker down under the covers. "You do that to hide, you know. You always want to cover your bases, or you're hiding in a trench, one of the trenches of your mind. You've dug in for the duration, with your typewriter, and built up a library, and you're riding out the storm—"

"In a trench?"

"North Atlantic Trench, honey. Amos, I didn't marry a soldier under siege, or a man whose only way of dealing with the world is to turn it into stories."

"Hmm," he said, taking a notecard from his pocket,

Try a parable. A man locks himself in his house for nine years trying to falsify the statement, "I exist." He gradually shuts out everyone else, until he finds out he doesn't exist. Like Ethan Brand realizing the unpardonable sin is searching for the unpardonable sin.

"Beth, I'm not hiding. I sleep with my head covered because I like the feeling of security. Damn. Why do you always have to be right?"

She laughed and kissed him. "You are the patriarch, Amos. Your calling isn't security; it's to face the danger and lead out, to lead us

through the mists of darkness to the Tree, Amos. Amos, you hold the priesthood, you are the man of the family, the man—even,” she paused, “even though you don’t have a hair on your chest.”

“Ow. I would if you didn’t keep pulling it.”

“Well, I must not be getting the follicle; it keeps growing back.”

The stream of people traversing campus to change classes had subsided to a few faithful tricklers holding fast the iron rod as they pressed on through the fog. Forty-five minutes left to study before work. Well, better than nothing. He looked at the drawing and smiled. He wanted to give Beth a kiss—just a kiss. She would like that.

Beth took the bobby pins out of her hair and let it fall down her flannel-pajamaed back. She was the only woman he knew who could say “No” by letting her hair loose.

Amos kissed her cheek, then her neck, running his hand up and down her back. “Oh now, listen,” she said, “don’t go starting anything. In the morning,” her voice a rich alto, tempting, pointing toward the future.

“It’s all right,” he said. “You’ll be too tired. You always are.” Then he added quickly, “So will I.”

They hadn’t made love in three weeks. (You keeping count? hung acidly in the air in a ghostly dance with questions about his bases of comparison with the sexual habits of other couples, and the temperature of his food.) “We’re both too tired, always.”

He hated it when she said, “In the morning.” He always slept badly, knowing he would oversleep. “I couldn’t stay awake in the library today,” he said, still running his hand along her back. “What’s your day been like?”

“Well, Alfred could stay awake. And it was so cold we couldn’t even go outside, so I’ve been cooped up here washing diapers and chasing the baby, all day. When he *finally* went down for a nap I finished *Eye of the Needle*. Ooh, as long as you’re there, could you scratch my back please?”

“Sure. Anything to oblige.”

“It was pretty good, but I hated that part where she’s just (Oh, that’s good. Could you do that again, under the shoulder blades) found out Faber killed her husband and the shepherd, and she’s going to make love to him (Could you get the small of my back, please) one more time, and pretend to like it—so he won’t suspect. And then it says, ‘After a few minutes she didn’t have to pretend’ (Just my back).”

"I thought you might have an itch on your front."

"Just my back. Anyway, that's the worst kind of pornography—"

"Tickling?"

"Now quit that," she said, squirming around to face him. "I don't—"

She was laughing, so he kissed her. "Quit tickling me!"

"Sorry, I thought you were just playing."

"You never know when to quit."

"Sorry. So, would you like a superlover like Faber?"

"No, you'll do fine."

"Just me and my herd of buffalo?"

"Are you trying to start a fight?"

"No. I just—"

"Why else would you bring that up again? Honestly, Amos, sometimes you *do* have the finesse of a water buffalo in heat."

"Thanks."

"Change the subject, Amos."

"Had any nice dreams lately, Beth?" slightly exaggerating her intonation.

"Keep pushing, Mister Mock Turtle."

"Oh, I didn't mean anything by it."

"The hell."

"What, I can't use your name anymore?"

"You sure know how to ruin an evening."

"Sorry. I thought we were going to change the subject."

"Good night," she said and turned over. Then, after a few minutes, "I had the strangest dream last night. We were rival spies, and Faber was chasing us all over England trying to kill us."

"On foot?"

"No, submarine and airplane. Old World War I biplanes. And you kept saying, 'Curse you, Red Baron.' And then he caught me, and I was calling to you for help, and you stood off in a corner smiling and laughing, writing it all down, as if—you were writing the script."

"Hey, it's only a dream." He snuggled close, a hand on her top shoulder, the other working under the shoulder she was lying on. "I love you, I wouldn't do that."

"Yes, you would. Because Faber turned into Fred. And I was nursing him, and he had teeth and kept biting me. And you said, 'Well, I can see you've got everything under control here. I've got to go to school.' And my nipples were bleeding, Amos, my breasts; and you said, 'Look, I'm going to be late for class.'"

"Is that why you don't want to make love?" Amos asked slowly.

“Well, I know what’s on your mind. I’m here all day long with the baby. Sometimes I just want some adult conversation. Half the women on the block work. The other half are home with their kids all day. They’ve got the same problems I do, and I can’t talk with them. Do you know how many girls come up here from little southern Utah towns just to escape and get married? Girls who’ve never even been out of the state? What am I going to talk about with girls like that? Fred is charming, but I don’t want to talk about him all day. I want to talk about books, or what’s going on in the world, or what it’s like to live abroad. Instead I’m cooped up doing diapers all day. Can’t go anywhere in the fog and cold anyway.”

“Get in the car and—Oh come on, Beth, don’t cry.” They were sitting up now. He hugged her. “If it would help, take a drive.” He kissed her, but she pulled away.

“Stop, Amos. This is all for you. I graduated early just so I wouldn’t be a drain on our resources. But you just keep taking classes and taking classes. Don’t you think I wanted to take extra classes too? And you don’t even share them with me, any more than you share your spirit with me. You know you haven’t taken me to the temple for two months? We don’t have family home evening because you work Monday nights. We don’t read the scriptures together, you don’t discuss the gospel with me. Sure I can do all this alone, but how are we going to spend eternity together if we can’t even spend time? I need you spiritually. We both do. I see myself turning into a shrew. I don’t want that. I want you, Amos, and not just to tell me the clever thing you said in class today, or occasionally someone else’s snazzy remark. But all you know how to do is argue.”

“Yeah. I suppose so.” It offended Amos that she was right. He’d never considered himself very good at the Socratic method, but his approach to learning was dialectical—or confrontative anyway. He didn’t quite feel comfortable with *dialectic*. Did people still say *snazzy*? He knew how to set up two epigraphs in dialectic to each other and to whatever he was writing. But if someone started talking about the dynamics of their movement within the dialectic, he began to sweat and try translating into more concrete terms. It was one of those nasty little words like *phenomenological*. Although he could now comfortably use the word *epistemology*.

“Trying to come up with a clever response?”

“No, I’m just thinking about the phenomenology of epistemological dialectics.”

“Quite a mouthful. Been rehearsing long?”

“Wholly extempore. I think that was a once-in-a-lifetime perfor-

mance.”

“You’re too much an analyst. That’s why I can’t talk to you about books. You start asking about all the symbolism, or the thematic development or— All that stuff works on a subconscious level for me. A poem is a whole, beating thing. It sings, it celebrates, it says come, dance, dance before the Ark, love me in wild nights. But you’re more interested in wordplay than foreplay. ‘Surgeons must be very careful when they undertake to use the knife, for under all their fine incisions beats the culprit, life.’ What you want to do, Amos, is pin the poem down.”

“I also remember what happened to David when he danced before the Ark. Naked, as I recall.”

“Oh, Amos,” her voice wistful, sympathetic. “Honey, I don’t despise you for your love of words. I don’t despise you at all: I just don’t want to make love to you. You treat me sometimes like you treat your words.”

“You mean I try to pin you down?”

“You like to back your words into a corner and worry them, tease out their implications, like a badger worrying its prey. Sometimes you badger me, Amos. A lot. I don’t feel loved or cherished or even wanted when you do that.”

“But I do love you, Beth. I just get frustrated sometimes. Beth, you have no idea.”

“I do have an idea. Sex is not everything in a marriage. Look, Amos, this is fruitless. You act as though I didn’t want you, when in fact, sometimes I’ll be sitting here in the middle of the day and this great wave of desire sweeps over me, and I’d like to call you and say all kinds of things I could get in trouble for saying over the phone.”

“I’ve never heard any indication of that.”

“You would have if you’d come home earlier tonight instead of working on your silly paper. But now I’m too tired. So wake me before school.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that, Beth. Sweet dreams.” We could have been making love all this time we’ve been talking, he thought.

After a few minutes, as Amos drifted toward sleep, Beth said, “That’s another thing you don’t share with me, Amos: your dreams.”

“Well, they’re not nearly as colorful as yours. Often, I don’t even know they’re dreams; they’re so real. I dream I’ve committed adultery and I’m afraid to tell you. I know I’ll never see you again. And the world in my dreams is very bleak, everything in grays, and I wake up shivering. Then I look over and there you are. It’s like discovering repentance. Nightmares are the best argument yet for God’s existence.”

Beth laughed. “With whom?”

“What? Oh. I don’t know. I’ve never seen her face. I’m not sure she’s even present in the dreams.”

She laughed again, gently. “Poor man. You’ve had too much to do this semester. I guess you just need to get off into some anonymous place for a while.”

“No, you’ve got the image backward. She’s the one who enters me. Beth, she has a tongue like you wouldn’t—what a thing to be talking about with your wife. Doesn’t it bother you that I have dreams like this?”

“Why? Does she represent a desire for another woman?”

“I hope not; she’s got a tongue like a frog.”

“Oh, you’ve got this thing for animals? Honey, you’d better read Leviticus again,” she said, laughing.

“No, it’s sticky, like she could reach in there and pull out my soul.”

“Well, they don’t call it soul-kissing for nothing, honey,” she laughed, slipping her arm around his shoulder. After a moment she said, “Nope. I still don’t like it. We’re just going to have to find something else, Amos.”

“Yeah. It’s not the same as before we were married, is it?”

“Nope, it’s not the same. Look, wake me in the morning,” she said, kissing him. “I do think about you when you’re gone.”

If you don’t let your cat have a litter before you spay her, you’ll have a mighty nervous cat on your hands. He kept waking up with this piece of advice running through his mind. Where had he heard it?

P.E. 184, Social Dance. The Latin Hustle. Lab night with a live band. Forward, back, stomp, stomp, stomp. He couldn’t get it. “Rock forward on the ball of your right foot, then back on the heel, then stomp left, right, left,” she said.

“I’m never going to be Fred Astaire at this rate.”

“So don’t worry about it. Ginger Rogers said she knows a dentist in Los Angeles who can dance better than he ever could.” The music got louder. “Said she gets tired of hearing what a great dancer he is. Like always hearing what a great guy your ex-hus—” The music was very loud now, and he couldn’t hear.

It was the baby. Amos climbed out of bed, blinking.

The clock read 2:30.

Alfred’s diaper was dry, but he had caught his foot in a crib slat. Amos freed him, kissed him. “You see, I’m not just the diaper service. I do slats too.”

Alfred asked for milk. Amos put two ounces in the bottle, turned the knob on the music box three times, covered Alfred, and went back

to bed. 2:40. He could still sleep for four or five, no, four hours.

He kept thinking about what Ginger Rogers had said. He was too tired to ponder the connection, but he felt his face flush and wanted to hit Beth. He blinked in astonishment, shook his head sharply a couple of times, then kissed the back of her neck instead.

"Don't even think of it, Beth; that would be too horrible."

"Stop mumbling and go to sleep. What is it now?"

"Divor—Oh God, Beth. We've got to work this out. I'm sorry it's so hard to talk. I didn't even know you were awake."

"The music box always wakes me." She turned over to face him and pulled his head onto her shoulder. "It'll work out, honey. The world looks better after sleep."

"G'night."

He turned over. Did anyone still do the Hustle? He remembered discovering, shortly after their marriage, that Beth hugged him differently now—danced closer. When he told her that, she'd put on her Groucho glasses and said, "If I held you any closer I'd be on the other side of you."

He woke up again. 4:30. So tired.

They hadn't been dancing for some time. Fast dances he didn't like: he felt too conspicuous, and formal dances were too hard to learn, even though Beth had offered to teach him some.

5:45.

The alarm was set for 6:00. He reset it for 6:30, then stopped it quickly when it went off. Beth hadn't stirred. He snuggled up close, ran his hand over her legs. She did not say "mmmm," as she did occasionally, or even nothing (next best)—only, "That's all you wanted to get married for. Dammit, quit waking me up. I'm too tired."

He rolled back over and looked at the ceiling, cursing himself. Don't get up just yet, she'll think you're running away. "Your legs, they're very long," he'd said the first time he'd met her. Then he'd flushed and said, "Should I notice things like that?"

She'd started laughing. "You make it sound like a birth defect or something."

He laughed too. "I'm sorry. I mean, maybe it's one of those things you're supposed to notice but not comment on, um, I uh, ayuh," he said, laughing. He hated dances, but this was a special Midsummer (actually July 5) dance, outdoors.

"Well of course I want you to notice my legs. They're the best part of me. That's why I always get the leggy parts, high kicking and all. By far the most attractive part of me."

"Oh, I don't know. I raawther like the rest of you."

"I saw you in the parade yesterday," he'd said, introducing himself. "I'll have to come and see your play."

"I've never much liked parades, but it's good publicity. So tell me, why do you remember me out of, how many hundreds of girls were in that parade?"

"It was your hair. The light caught your hair, almost auburn. I've always been partial to anything verging towards red. And your legs. They're very—" He woke up, looked at the clock, and cursed. 7:30.

He ran to the bathroom to wash and shave, then to the kitchen to stuff some fruit and leftovers into a bag, then orange juice and Lysine—the baby was awake. He didn't have time to change him, but after he had, he filled Fred's bottle and settled him back in the crib to play quietly, or with joyful noise.

He ran all the way to school and was late. Again.

Three papers to write before next Friday. "Flew and Falsification" coming along fine, "Socrates as Superman" a good idea, but no time to do all the research he should. Well, just play New Critic with this third paper and look very closely at Ethan Brand's quest for the unforgivable sin, glad he had finally found a topic. But he felt almost a panic over the lack of time.

He stayed late in the library.

"You know," Beth said over the phone, "the baby only sees you in the middle of the night. You leave before he gets up, and even when you don't study late, he's in bed before you get home." She laughed, "All right, Alfred, talk to Daddy. I think I could train this boy to high jump if I held the phone high enough."

"Hi, Alfred. Momma tells me you've been playing with all the pots and pans. I'd come home and play with you, but I've got to write a—"

"Hiya."

"Oh, he gave it back," Beth said. "You should see the smile on his face."

He turned around; three people were waiting to use the phone. "I've got to go. I'll be here till ten or eleven."

"Could you leave a few minutes early and pick up a gallon of milk?"

"Yeah. I guess so," feeling mild panic at the loss of study time.

"I'm too tired tonight. I'll wake you in the morning."

"Right."

"Things of the Spirit," he said, "I find too intimate, hard to share, a

bit embarrassing. I'm a little like those people across the river partaking of the fruit of that tree. It's delicious, and then they feel ashamed and not very desirable. It's not that I don't want to share my spirit with you, Beth. It's just that I feel awkward, like a new groom who wants to be alone with his bride, who doesn't—"

"Doesn't want any intrusion?" She didn't seem hurt by the suggestion, as Beth normally would.

"No. Yes. Like someone who wants solitude at present. The sharing comes later."

"I don't think you're seeing what's happening over there," she said. "They feel ashamed because they're looking across the river at all of us standing here in the windows pointing at them and mocking. They're ashamed because they're paying attention to us, not because they partook of the fruit. The fruit of the Tree of Life, my own, my dear, my love, fills you with the love of God, the desire to tell your family, exhorting them to partake."

"Let's get naked," she said. And he realized he wasn't talking to Beth. He felt drawn toward her (it seemed her father was there, too), compelled. Better co-operate. It would mean excommunication, divorce, but he could do nothing else: He wanted to co-operate. "No. Look, I'm a married man, have a wonderful baby, charming—seventeen months—Damn." Not again.

He woke up and just lay there (it hadn't even been erotic) the phrase "masturbating with words" going through his mind, Beth's phrase for the delights he took in words. It was nothing to be ashamed of, Elder Packer had said. The body is like an overproductive factory which has to discharge what it produces. It does this all by itself while you're asleep, usually accompanied by erotic dreams. It doesn't need any help from you. Nothing to be ashamed of, but all the deacons and teachers and priests sitting with their fathers there in the Marriott Center watching the conference broadcast were glad the lights were dim and their fathers couldn't see how embarrassed they were to be talked about before the whole priesthood, even as they were relieved to learn it wasn't masturbating (with words, the Beth-voice added). But it was years since he was a teenager. And for married men, for married men, this was not perfectly natural. For married men it signified some wrong (with words) in their marriage. It betokened not concord, but shame (with words), this overproductive fac(masturba)tory that discharges its effluent into the erot(ting)ic river of dreamtime: The stream I go a-fishing in.

Amos made another assault against the shame he felt. That's not what I'm doing in school. That's not what my love of words means.

That's not a physical love. My love for Beth is physi(words)cal.

Finally, he said softly, "Damn the sexual nature of all language," got out of bed and opened his drawer quietly, so Beth wouldn't hear, wouldn't know what had happened.

He threw Alfred's wet blanket on the floor, then put the baby down on a changing pad, and peeled off his soaked pajamas, undershirt, and diaper. "Pee pee potti-pot." He straddled the baby on his hip and headed down the hall to the bathroom. Alfred let loose. "Where Alf the sacred river ran," Amos muttered. "Listen, Alf, these were just clean. You're supposed to do that in the potti."

He dressed Alfred again, filled the bottle halfway, yawned, and put him back in the crib. "I can still sleep for another hour after a quick shower." Instead, he picked the baby up again, with a blanket, and went out to sit on the living room couch. "I love you, Alfred, nestled in the crook of your father's arm, like this. Even if you did just pee all over me. There's so much to teach you. I'm afraid sometimes you're going to grow up without me." He held Alfred's bottle for him, even though he knew the baby didn't need help. "The world is wondrous, so wondrous you can see angels dancing on the head of a pin. You can see God moving in His majesty and glory in even the smallest particle, in charms dancing on a quark with the angels on the head of the pin, in that negligible little half an X chromosome we call a Y. X, X, X, and Y join in a fullness of joy to form a Tetragrammaton showing forth the image and glory of God. You didn't think you were going to get a Sunday school lesson with your apple juice, did you?" He held the sleeping baby close against his heart, listening to Alfred's breathing. He himself awoke ten minutes or so later and started crying soundlessly. He walked to the crib to put his son down. He didn't know why he was letting himself cry. He wiped his face and went into the living room.

He'd bought an abridged Bible the other day for a quarter at the DI. Truly an extravagance, one more heavy book to move from apartment to apartment, house to house. He opened to the frontispiece, a nice print by Blake, and saw God measuring out the universe, a compass running along his thumb and forefinger. Beth had said, "You know, books to you are like a saloon door beckoning to a drunk at happy hour."

"Saloons at happy hour? Something a bit anachronistic about that."

"Something a bit anachronistic about you," she'd said, squeezing his arm affectionately.

God, beard blown to one side, was blowing into the universe. Where is that second wind coming from? Is that the opposition in all things to which even God is subject, which sets the spheres to vibrating

musically? God's presence, and the wind blowing his beard, don't you see, holding the universe in measure like two legs of a compass, answers Flew's question. What would cause you to doubt God's existence? His absence, or his ceasing to exist. You would know if that happened. Things would fall apart, and you would have no desire to hold them together. All compasses would disappear, all compassion. There would be nothing left to circumscribe everything, unify, encompass all knowledge, secure all creation into one great whole. One integer. Numberless. Numberless are the works of his hands. Encompassed about everlastingly in the arms of his love. Flipped, that compass becomes a 'V'—the point at which the lines of the torso converge with the lines of the thigh, at which male and female converge and create. The compass in your marriage has slipped sideways somehow, has developed teeth.

He pulled another pair of garments from the dresser, went into the bathroom, and stood under the shower. Christmas break's a-coming on mighty fast, Beth. Hang on, and I'll spend a lot of time with you.

The door opened and shut as Beth walked in, opened the window, then reached into the shower pretending to grope around for the faucet. She turned the shower off, then stepped out of her robe and into the tub, touched him again, and said, "What's this? Listen to the rain. You didn't realize it was raining, did you? And the fog is gone. Here, put this on."

"It's better when you do. I'm going to be very tired later."

"Later," she said, kissing him and pulling him toward the far end of the tub. "Come. Here. I won't bite."

"I'm trying to turn the water back on."

"Silly man. You shouldn't have turned it off in the first place. Bring the soap."

Things will be all right now. We can work out our problems. I will sleep well tonight, his temple said to the library table it had no time to rest upon. Xanthippe. I have to say something about Xanthippe. Plato has her wrong. She has a baby to support (cliché, cliché. No it's a wonderful word for a child who can't stand up alone) and a husband who spends all day talking philosophy and refuses to take any money for it. And here he is about to leave her alone to take care of this baby, and he's worried about a borrowed chicken? It must be hard being married to a . . .

Amos was asleep there in the library when she put her arms around him, her fingers over his eyes. "and laid the curse/So darkly on my eyelids as to amerce,' the slash is important," he muttered. "Otherwise no

one knows you're quoting poetry, and they wonder where the capital letter came from. Do you cease to exist when you stop thinking, Descartes? When you sleep?"

"Sleep," she said.

"that if I had died/the beath-weights' hmm, hit the wrong key on my typewriter. What is Beth awaiting? What are you a-weighing, Beth?"

"Why typewriter?" she said gently. "Why typewriter? You can feel things without your typewriter, can't you?" she said taking her hands from his eyes and placing them on either cheek.

And he felt tears start again. "'Nay' is worse/From God." He could feel the tears running under her fingers, fingers pulling his lips toward hers. "'O my friend.' I'm sorry I can't kiss you. I have a canker."

