

ONE

All, all is beautiful, careening as we are.

Past the yawn of the dell, past the meadow where the road turns from Oxbow to Rossie, past where the two boys stood off a ways from the blinking man, all watching the silver foreign car as it took the turn past them, tight along the single black lane. They had stopped their work to watch, the curved narrow tines of their hayforks delicately set in the mown grass. They were midway in the field, a hard morning's work behind them in wide tongues of newly mown and pale green hay which they had been forking into narrow strips for the old mechanical baler to gather up. The midday light hung low and thick to their knees, shimmering off in a drifting haze, thin light at their faces. They seemed to float in light and yet their complexions were the scrubbed pale rawness of upper New York, faces he had seen all his growing years. They were primitives, they or their kind had stood in folding hills from the days when British raiders moved through these same counties and skinny boys played club ball in the greens along the Hudson. Two square red wagons sat on rubber wheels at the far end of the wedge-shaped meadow, one wagon already stacked with the squat, regular bales of yellowing hay. The three faces watched him drive past, looking up from the work.

The ball rose from deep in the green meadow, the white leather cover slowly spinning in the high air, light and lofting above their gaze. All sounds receded, it would not be caught. He turned back to face the road, smiling.

They paused long enough to watch the car move through their sight and disappear, gone along the road toward the islands.

It was long gone, already turning heavy, falling, an uncharged particle, a home run.

He fixed them once more in the rearview mirror—they were already turning back to the work—before the road turned away, and then in the same plane he saw his own grey eyes, watching the road and the hillsides receding. Already he would be putting his mind to the next pitch. He knew she was watching him, but he concentrated instead on the waxy cardboard image on the dashboard. His own face, the face in the mirror, a mint-condition Fleer's from the World Series year. He was capless in the picture, short-haired. It was unusual to be photographed without the cap, but he had insisted on that. "It's a shame not to see your eyes, your beautiful eyes," a woman had told him, and so when they came to take the pictures, he did not wear the cap.

It was early in the season when they came to take the pictures, early in the time when it seemed that everyone had something to give you. Two hundred dollars for your picture, a glove for your hands. Later they would begin to take away, each season a slow process of taking away. For a while you went into the spring thinking the hits and runs were yours, the outside corners, the slow curves; always they took them away, just as surely as they took the tone from the muscles, the air from your lungs. You smiled and pitched again. It was all give and take, and now it was all taken. This season there had been no check, no picture, no glove, no season. Only the slow curves, the road running home.

She was watching him look at the card.

"Is that reality therapy or something?" he asked.

She laughed like an echo.

"Do you think you need that?"

He honestly did not know her, he had tried to explain. The thin, blond shoulder-length hair, frosted silver where it framed her tanned, smooth face, jogged no particular memory, sent no juices. It was bewildering, he could not say he didn't know her, he knew a hundred of her, right down to the aviator sunglasses, the smoked lilac lenses. She was evidently bright and pampered, smooth brown skin across the collarbone, cool and fragrant flesh under the cotton shirt. She pressed her knees together, smiled, yet he could recall no common history between them, not even a chance meeting and a slow night. There was nothing beyond the morning and the drive up from Syracuse.

"That is your baseball card, isn't it?" he asked.

"If it's the gum you're after, I chewed that a long time ago," she said, this time laughing like a chime in the wind.

"Really?"

"Don't worry," she said, her voice growing darker. She was worried about him, and knowing how much he could not remember about her, he did not blame her.

From Rossie to Hammond the air was plain and the houses mainly unshaded. It was a bleak stretch always, the desert between hills and the river. One newly tinned farmhouse roof flared momentarily with searing white light reflected from the sun. It was flat and painful and too dazzling to look at for long. He had the feeling she was still laughing. How beautiful everything is. Yet I suppose you will think I am lying, he thought she said.

We drove on. I remember.

Suddenly, along the high plateau to Chippewa Bay, limestone ledges marked the beginning of the long, subtle declines by which the road dipped patiently toward the St. Lawrence.

"How far will you be going?" he asked, and she laughed again and he knew she was humoring him.

It's not me, lady, he thought. I remember everything from February to this moment, everything but you. But he said nothing.

The islands, when they saw them, were thatches of emerald scruff; verdant, dark divots detached from one another by thick, grey channels of water in flat light. In the chop of the surface, the light rocked and glimmered secretly, as if tiny mirrors floated there, countless shards, each throat full of the voice of light.

"Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?"

He looked at her without answering.

Sometimes you could swear that you heard each individual voice throughout the stadium, that you marked each pair of eyes, the listless fluttering of cheap banners, the single, errant, floating tissue of white wrapping lofting high in the upper deck, drifting slowly down. Two fingers wiggling between the thighs, eyes behind the grid of the mask imploring you not to go crazy on him just now, the bat slowly undulating like a cobra's head. It was the most peaceful moment on earth.

"I really can't remember," he tried to tell her, making it something like a joke.

"Does it matter?"

They walked down toward the water to where the cove was crisscrossed by a grid of floating docks and a bland and ugly assortment of lusterless hulls. It was like a floating trailer park. Aluminum, fiberglass, and plastic curves slid up and down in the water of the slips; there was a stain of scum and weed slime on some hulls. All over people squatted and crawled upon the boats like grubs on stones, dusty silver stones like the ones you found along the river as a boy, those too stained with slime.

“I am a pitcher of baseballs . . .”

She laughed at this odd way to say it. It was a conspiratorial laugh, she knew he joked like this.

He had picked up one of the stones.

“At a time, I would have been known here. I would not stand by the shore because of the fame.”

“Like Odysseus by the ships,” she said.

“What?”

“People still know you. I knew you.”

“Yes.”

He chucked a stone into the water. It was not the pitcher, he threw it like a boy would.

The secret, he remembered telling a young pitcher, is you never really release the ball. Sure it leaves your hand, but you power it, you move it all the way in; you strain your legs and thighs to keep it in your grip.

“That’s why, when a manager takes it from you . . .” He shrugged and did not finish. It was a bitter thought. He would not have bitter thoughts.

She pretended not to hear him, or so he thought.

Someone had turned at the sound of the stone’s plunk, looking in toward shore from the deck of his boat, perhaps thinking the sound had been a fish. He turned back to the yellow rope he was coiling at his feet. It was a wooden deck, a wooden cabin. Here and there elsewhere in the slips one or another of the boats also displayed wood—an inlaid panel, a cabin, or only a single dark rail—dark and oily wood. It brought back memories, of wooden boats, nineteen-foot rowboats with high prows, long oars of ebony, mahogany, and cherry. He wasn’t that old, it wasn’t that long ago, thirty years at the most when he first remembered seeing them. Now this aluminum scum.

Even now baseball remained a game of wood and leather, of pine tar, rosin, cotton, wool. Even in the midst of the plastic turfs, with their midsummer smell of new car interiors, the blast of humid heat as the moisture steamed up from them, the damned seams that shot ground balls like mortar shells into the outfield, the ghastly green of Easter basket grass; even now a club would supply wool caps instead of synthetics to those who asked. The sweat would cool along the leather band inside the cap, the merest breeze evaporate the moisture in the wool, cooling your skull. Wolfman Hunt, the coolly silent, very dark-skinned outfielder would stick his bats in the sauna before games in early spring, the ash smell mixing with the redwood fragrance, the cedar benches; and when he rubbed the tar in, it would fill the grain where the sauna swelled it, his hands and the bat the same color where he gripped it. On some summer afternoons the bat rack smelled like a lumber mill and it was nice to sit near it, even on days when they could not get you a run to pitch with, even when your only reason to sit there was to stay out of sight and keep them thinking what a silent-suffering gamer you were not to be bitching for some support out there. Sometimes you wanted to laugh. Sometimes you dreamed of grabbing your own bat and doing it for yourself, a contact fly that carried down the line in the opposite field. That had been the worst thing about being traded, not getting to dream about batting. That was the worst thing, not getting to dream any longer.

Children were laughing. He looked up to the tongue of uncluttered water in the near part of the bay where two kids pumped a pedal raft along the channel from the boat launches to the open river. The sunburned man, too, looked up from where he knelt at the cabin of his boat, the yellow nylon line now coiled before him in a lump. He seemed to think that the children had shouted to him, and he waved vaguely, trying to be nice. The flat hull of the raft slapped mildly in the wake of a departing motorboat. The raft rocked on its pontoons when the twin slashes of the wake crossed them. The kids laughed again and pedaled harder. As the wake stretched toward the slips, some of the slumbering boats began rocking gently at their moorings, the caves of their hulls shrouded with tight canvas. The boats screeched when the wake reached them, a series of screeches as the white foam-plastic bumpers rubbed against the metal docks, the sausage-shaped bumpers screeching one by one between dock

and gunnels. It was different from the noise tires made when the boats pressed against them. The tires sighed, the plastic screeched. He turned away from the water.

“Well?” she asked, “Is this it? Do you want to try to stay here? Should we see about a cottage?”

He shook his head.

“I haven’t been sick, have I?” he asked, “Is that what?”

“Don’t you feel well?”

He chose another stone and chucked it sidearm.

“The best I have in years, kiddo!” he said. “The best I have in years . . .”

“Then why worry?”

Beyond the bay the river made its own sound. A constant distant hiss. Voices somewhere and motors buzzing way out on the river floated on the hiss. It was not unlike the sound in a stadium, once you are used to it. There was a shore breeze. Beyond the inlet to the harbor on one of the smallest islands a couple was embracing in front of their cottage. The island had a sheer bank around its perimeter, a lip of muddy turf with bleached roots—the roots of trees—thrusting down into the water. The island reminded one of an onion just pulled from the soil. You could see the couple in the hazy light, alone on the small onion island.

I am alone, she thought he was thinking.

“No,” he said quietly, “let’s drive some more. Let’s drive to Clayton.”

Later, in the honky-tonk river town of Clayton, they ate beef greedily at the bar of McCormick’s seafood restaurant. For a while she was the only woman there in the bar. The bartender studied his face as if he knew, but then seemed to decide to say nothing. He might have thought they were arguing, the way they sat there, not speaking, drinking ale. It had been hours since they ate in Syracuse and they filled themselves with Canadian ale while they waited for the beef to be served.

It was no different, he thought, than it would have been if he did know her. He didn’t like to talk when he went out with someone, he never had—although he could not deny that he was even less apt to talk in public once he had become famous. For a moment he had considered explaining all this to her there at the bar, but he had not wanted to make talk, not even under the circumstances.

While they ate, a slowly gathering crowd of young men and college girls in tee shirts filled the small barroom. It was evident from their talk that they were waiting for the All-Star game to begin. He had the idea that these people were waiters and waitresses elsewhere, that they were not a summer crowd. That idea made no sense, really, when you considered the time of day and the season. It was just what he thought.

“National League ain’t shit this year, all washed-up Cincinnati Reds and a coupla spades from Pittsburgh . . .”

He would not turn to see the face of the kid who had said this. It would be embarrassing to be known. The asshole calls Dave Parker a spade, he doesn’t know baseball. Sometimes he forgot how racist it was here.

“There’s Garvey too.”

“That prick’s so square he oughta be a Yankee . . .”

The bartender laughed. You had to admit it was easy to hate Garvey, crouching like a Little League twerp every time there was a throw to first, covering the ball in the glove like he was carrying home Twinkies to his mother.

Someone shouted across the bar, getting into the conversation.

“Garvey can play for Reggie when he doesn’t show . . .”

Yankee country here. He knew that, he had grown into it himself, counted Maris’s homeruns while never really liking him. Once saw Casey Stengel in Alex Bay, going fishing. It hadn’t been surprising to be drafted into the National League; it hadn’t been bad at all. He had found himself realizing that he always secretly believed it was where they played real baseball. Then it was bewildering to go in the trade to the other league after fourteen years, to play in Yankee Stadium after the renovation.

It was getting louder now, the talk, and he watched her swipe up a dab of brown mustard from her plate using the last part of her sandwich to wipe at it. She ate like a drinker. She saw him watching her in the bar mirror and smiled—such a friendly smile—and touched his hand.

I should know her, he thought. It was a very sad feeling, sad and frustrating, like trying to clear your head when you just wake up.

“Stop it!” a girl giggled. She laughed like someone was tickling her. Everything was getting louder. He sneaked a look at the girl. Nips pushed against the tee shirt, there was a time when counting

nips was a big deal among the country boys, like the beaver hunts Bouton wrote about. Something to do on the road when you're horny and dumb.

"If you don't stop it," the girl told the dude who was tickling her, "I'll shove your face under the table and really give you something to lick."

The dude had been licking her arm, really rude and obvious. Everyone laughed when the girl shut him down. He looked back at the bar mirror. The piece of bread she had used to wipe the mustard with was now discarded on the plate, a dry wedge of bread with the shape of her mouth still there where she had bit away the mustard. She looked very skeptical and uncomfortable about the talk in the bar. Yet it was the kind of talk you heard around baseball games, he could tell her that. The game affected some people that way, they talked rude. But she'd know that, if she knew baseball.

It was very loud there, filled with laughter, all the pregame horse-shit starting on the television. A close-up of the Seattle dome, the camera panning to the big suspended speaker that Willie Horton hit earlier in the season. A four-hundred-foot homerun dropping for a single, the speaker being in play. Through the large picture window at the rear of the bar you could see into the dining room. It was like looking into an aquarium. Families, men with rooster knit ties and seersucker coats, women in organdy gauze. He turned back to the bar before anybody could get a good look at him, studied the framed pictures of the great, gone wooden boats of the river. He wondered if he had remembered right at Chippewa Bay, if there really had been all those boats when he was younger or if it was all these framed photos over McCormick's bar that he was remembering.

He felt like a stranger, it wasn't surprising. Always there was the feeling when you came into tourist towns, into places like these, that you alone were strangers. Even the summer people, the fudgies, seemed linked by some secret lore.

They left before the game began and walked down to the dock and watched the river tour depart. The tour boat was full, not everyone was watching the game. It was Yankee country but Canada gleamed across the river, silent and lost in the past. O Ellis Valentine, he thought, what a nice name for a baseball player . . .

Andre Dawson.

"Flynn," he said.

“What?”

“Flynn.”

“I know,” she said. “Do you want to watch the game?”

“Not really.”

“I thought you were announcing yourself . . .”

“Do I kiss you?” he asked. “I mean, in whatever life I know you in, do I kiss you?”

She shrugged. It was a funny gesture, a coyly smart face.

“And you?” he asked. “Your name?”

“Emma,” she said, looking glum. “You do know that. I told you, you do know that.”

“Whatever you say, lady.”

They walked from the tour boat dock up along the strip in the cooling night air. The boat was down the river before them, a moving carnival out on the black river. The game was on the radio at the ice cream stand, it filled the night. A fishing guide was checking gear in the air outside his shop, he too had a radio on. They walked, Flynn and Emma, like a young married couple, not holding hands, but close to one another, their hips brushing sometimes, up and down the strip once again, smelling the river in the air, beer from the tavern doorways, a smell like burnt sugar or cotton candy pervading everything.

Then they went to their room and slept, first she and then he, each in a separate bed. It was a lovely, soft evening and the noise from the street seemed far from them, below in another, gaudier world, submerged there like the clam shells gulls dropped in the shallows; iridescent moons each with a jagged hole pecked in the middle.

He woke and wondered what she was dreaming. What hour it was. His arm was already numb, although he could not have been asleep for long. A panel truck, army brown and camouflaged in light tan and green patches, roared down the strip, the faulty muffler sounding like the glass-packs Flynn remembered from his teens. Soldiers on their way back to Drum, the bars closed for the night. He hammered a fist into his arm until it began to tingle with the circulation, then lay back again.

Below there was no noise. Silent lights passed on the visible segment of the river, high somewhere the engine of a small plane labored steadily against the night. She seemed to catch her breath

as if frightened, but then laughed softly in her sleep, once and then once again, kicking her leg free from the sheets. The second laugh had been different, filled with genuine delight. If she were awake, he thought, she might have clasped her hands then, delighted. He wondered why he was certain of this, whether he had known that gesture from her before. He remembered other times, lying awake beyond a woman he barely knew, attempting to piece together some personality for the body beside him. These were not happy memories. For some reason he knew that Emma was someone he knew much more about; she had not questioned him when he lay down to sleep without her, she had shown no hesitation throughout this long day.

My unborn sister, he thought, she could as well be that, a cousin, the wife of a friend. He had a dim sense that it was as much the fascination of not knowing her as it was anything else that was prolonging the reeling in of any recollection.

Her breathing resumed a slow, regular course. It made him think of the sound of a trolling motor, it was that kind of rhythm. I cannot be crazy, he thought, if I notice so much; it is just that some things are momentarily in deeper pools. For the first time since they ate he wondered about the score of the game. He slept like someone slipping into black water. As he fell into it he knew his arm was numbing already. Someone moved quietly along the hallway outside their door.

He was absent when she woke. She reached toward the empty bed, watching the sunlight wash across her palm. The bed made her think of shed skin, the wispy silk of snakes; it was as if he had peeled himself from both bed and sleep in a single movement. There was something uncommonly childlike and affectionate about the sight of the white furls of the sheet in the glancing sunlight. She was aware of the scent of his body, and another odor, medicinal and sweet.

She rolled back toward the wall and was surprised to see flowers on the side table. Black-eyed Susans and Loosestrife in a white foam cup.

The key turned in the lock. He had bundles in his arms and steadied them with his chin.

“Lo,” he said. “It is impossible to compose a proper breakfast on the road in America.”

She smiled and yawned.

“In what other countries have you composed breakfast?”

“None really,” he said smiling, “It’s what they tell you.”

“Do people really talk that way?”

He ignored her question. “I did spend two winters in Venezuela,” he said. “They eat fish there in the morning, I think.”

“They eat pickles and rice in Japan,” she said.

“Never played there.”

On the desk he set out two cups of yogurt, two Grannie apples, a smoked sausage in plastic skin, fat round hard rolls dusted with white, a new plastic thermos. Coffee smell came when he unscrewed the thermos cap.

From his pocket he dug out foil squares of butter, plastic tubs of jam, clear plastic flatware. In the last paper sack there were blueberries, dark and fat, each with a puckered navel.

“The berries aren’t in season,” she said.

“Why they sell them then?”

“I wish I ate breakfast.”

He laughed. “You will,” he said, “now . . .”

She too laughed and then slid from the bed, nude, very pale in the light despite her tan, her flesh gold where the sunlight washed her. She shivered slightly although the air was warm, padded to the shower. He poured coffee and screwed the top back on the new thermos.

“National League scored two unearned runs in the sixth and went on to win it by one run,” he said.

She could not hear him above the shushing water, he knew. He had stood with the hot water on his arm for at least a half hour that morning, heard nothing.

“I hope I left you some hot water,” he said.

“You didn’t mention the apples,” he said, “Grannies are from Australia or somewhere, I think . . .”

“I thought maybe we would take a run up to Massena and show you where I was born,” he said.

“But then you know that already . . . do you . . . ? I don’t think I can last long like this . . .”

Careening. A spider had woven a web of concentric circles over one pane of the window, the circles minutely oblongated where the crosswise ties adhered. The web shone like a prism.