The Actes and Monuments

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THE ACTES AND MONUMENTS

> As for myself, I am not sorry but I commit myself into God's hands, and I trust he will give me mouth and wisdom to answer according to the right.
>
> – John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs, The Actes and Monuments*

After the coronary, I quit. I could have slowed down, let things go easier, taken some of the jobs where little more than appearance was required. But I didn't do that. I like to believe that I cared too much for the law. No, I *do* believe that. Because if I had cared nothing for the law, I would have played at being an attorney—or else simply stopped being involved with law at all. But I did neither.

Rather, I let go my partnership and began looking for some way to use all I knew, all I was coming to know. It wasn't that I couldn't stand pressure; I could. I could stand quite a bit of pressure. What I could not stand was the tension that never lets up, the sort of thing generated by corporation cases that might go four or five years without resolution. Brief peaks followed by relaxation: those, the doctor said, would be all right.

So I was thirty-eight, a good lawyer by any standard—including the money I had let collect in stocks. A bachelor, and a one-time loser on the coronary circuit. What do you do? Maybe you settle down in Manhattan and have fun? Maybe you don't. There is no room in Manhattan for fun–not in the crowd I knew, anyhow. You are either in it or out of it; that was the rule, and everybody understood and accepted. Poor Harry wasn't in it. So Harry had to walk out of it. Who needs to be pushed?

But Harry is no loser. Not since Harry climbed out of Brooklyn Heights and into Yale Law School. No, Harry has to find himself a blast he can live with. Out of New York. So where? London? Not really. We don't function well in other places. Rio, Athens, Caracas, Tokyo? Any one of them is easy with my contacts. But they are imitations of what I am having to leave.

So Harry comes on very strong. Much stronger than anyone can credit, believe. Who knows where I caught the idiot virus that took me down there? Maybe it was *Absalom, Absalom*, which I once read, not understanding a word of it, but living in every crevice of time and space that the laureate of the Cracker World created.

It is no overstatement to say that my friends paled when they received postcards from Vicksburg. It was much too much. They were old postcards. Pictures in mezzotint of the Pennsylvania memorial, of the grass-covered earthworks outside the town. Post cards which must

have been printed at the latest in the early 1920s, and which had been in the old flyblown rack waiting for my hand almost half a century. I cannot remember what I wrote on the cards, but it must have been wonderful. I can say it was wonderful, because except for one slightly drunken phone call from Manhattan late at night about a week after I arrived, I got no answers to those cards at all. Perhaps they never arrived. Perhaps they slipped back into the time warp from which I had plucked them at the little clapboard store outside town where there was a single gas pump with a glass container at the top, which the proprietor had to pump full before it would run down into the tank of my XKE.

Should I tell you about that man? Who sold me gas, counted out my change, made no move at my hood or windshield, and told me in guarded tones that he had seen a car like mine once long ago. A Mercer runabout, as he remembered. Never mind.

I rented a place—leased it. Almost bought it right off, but had not quite that kind of guts. It was old, enormous, with a yard of nearly an acre's expanse. I came that first day to recognize what an acre meant in actual extent. I stood in my yard near an arbor strung with veiny ropes of scuppernong, looked back at the house through the branches of pear trees, past the trunks of pecan and oak strung with heavy coils of that moss that makes every tree venerable which bears it. My house, on my property. Inside I had placed my books, my records, my liquor, what little furniture I had collected in the brownstone I had left behind.

My first conclusion was that the coronary had affected my mind. I could have committed myself to Bellevue with my doctor's blessing. Or, secondly, had I found in some deep of my psyche a degree of masochism unparalleled in the history of modern man? Is it true that Jewishness is simply a pathology, not a race or a religion? Perhaps I had, in the depths of my pain and the confusion attendant on my attack, weighed myself in the balance and found my life and its slender probings at purpose wanting utterly. Could it be that a man who, in the very embrace of probable death, can find no reason for his living except the sweating grab of life itself housed in a body, looks at all things and condemns himself to Mississippi?

Or finally, grossest of all, was there an insight in my delirium whereby I saw Mississippi not as exile, not as condemnation, but as a place of salvation? Must we somehow search out the very pits and crannies of our secret terrors in order to find what for us will be paradise? Consider as I did, in retrospect, that no man of normal responses raised in Manhattan is going to look for himself in the deep South. And yet how many of those men of normal responses are happy? How many die at the first thrust of coronary, dreaming as life ebbs of a handful of dusty dark-green grapes, a sprig of verbena, the soft

weathered marble of an old Confederate monument within the shadow of which might have lain the meaning of their lives? I offer this possibility only because we are, most of us, so very miserable living out the lives that sense and opportunity provide. I wondered afterward, when I came to understand at least the meaning of my own choice, if we do not usually fail ourselves of happiness—of satisfaction, anyhow—by ignoring the possibilities of perversity. Not perversion. Those we invariably attempt in some form. No, perversity: how few of us walk into the darkness if that is what we fear. How few of us step into a situation which both terrifies and attracts us. If we fear water, we avoid it rather than forcing ourselves to swim. If we fear heights, we refuse to make that single skydive which might simultaneously free and captivate us. If we cannot abide cats, we push them away, settling for a world of dogs. You see how gross my insights had become.

In order to live, I thought, standing there, staring at the strange alien house which was now my legal residence and the place where I was determined to create, as in a crucible, the substance of my new life, it may be essential to force, to invade, to overwhelm those shadowed places we fear and, fearing, learn to ignore as real possibilities even when we know them to be real, to be standing erect against a hot sky windless and blind to their own beauties, realizable only to those of us who come from distant places.

A simpler explanation was offered me later by one of Vicksburg's most elegant anti-Semites, a dealer in cotton futures who, loathing my nation and my region, my presumed religion and my race, became a close friend. He suggested that Jews, for their perfidy, are condemned to have no place, to strike no roots.

—Don't you live always out of a moral and spiritual suitcase, he asked slyly. —Isn't it notable that there has never been any great architecture of the synagogue? How many of you speak the language of your great-grandfathers? Isn't placelessness a curse?

—Yes, I told him in answer to his last question. —Indisputably yes. But think of the hungers of a placeless man. Can you even begin to conceive the mind of a man who has suffered a failure of the heart once, who has fled all ordinary lives and come to Mississippi?

—No, he said, no longer joking or arch. —No, I can't conceive your talents, he half-asked, half-stated. —You'll be going to help niggers with the law, won't you?

—Yes, I told him. That certainly. Not that it will mean a great deal. Only the reflex of the retired gunfighter who no longer hopes either to purge the world of good or evil but whose hand moves, claws at his side when pressed, out of a nervous reaction so vast and profound that the very prohibition of God himself could not stop it.

—Good, he said. —Not about the niggers. Everybody in the country wants a try at that sack of cats. But not your way. We've never had a man who came loving, needing, down here to do that kind of thing. I want a chance to see this. It has got to be rich.

—What, I asked. —What will be so rich?

—Why, seeing a Yankee Jew fighting in the South because he needs her, because he loves her. Did you ever in your life hear the like of that?

How could I help loving? Where else could I come across such a man? But he was the least of it. There was, at the garage which saw to my car, an avowed member of the Klan who asked me why I had come so far to die. My answer satisfied him. —Because, if you have got to die, it is stupid to die just anywhere and by an accident of some valve in your heart. If it comes here, I will know why and maybe even when.

He looked at me and scratched his head. —My Christ, he said. I never heard nothing like that in all my life. You are a fucking nut.

—How do you like it, I asked him over the hood of my Jaguar, now dusty and hot with April sun.

—Why, pretty well, he said, grinning, putting out his hand without volition or even, I suspect, the knowledge he had extended it. I took it firmly, and he looked surprised. As if the last thing on earth he had ever expected to do was shake hands with some skulking Yankee kike determined to stir up his coloreds.

By this time you have dismissed me as a lunatic or a liar or both. Very well. You only prove that the most profound impulses of your spirit can find their fulfillment in Fairlawn, New Jersey. Good luck.

But if your possibilities are . . . what? More exotic, then I want to tell you the proving of what I found here in Vicksburg, Mississippi. I want to tell you about Mr. Grierson, and the cases we worked on together—cases which, whatever else, have found me for myself. So saying, I have to retreat to my first conclusion. The coronary affected my mind. This I'm sure of. Because, satisfied beyond any hope I brought from Manhattan with me, I am still enough of a rationalist to see that my satisfaction, my new life, and what Mr. Grierson and I do—have done—is beyond even the most liberally construed limits of ordinary sanity. I am not a mystic, thus able to excuse any deviation in myself, blessing the lunacy as a certain portent. I am a sensible man who, so cast, must admit that he has found sense nonsense and empty, and that a tract of lunacy laid out before him has bloomed like the distant desert glimmering before Moses as he lay down at last, his final massive coronary denying him the power to cross over Jordan and dwell some last loving days or months or years amidst the plenty that his lip-chewing endurance had reared up out of the sands.

I was handling now and again the smallest of cases for certain black people who had heard that an eccentric Yankee lawyer had come to town and would do a workmanlike job of defending chicken thieves, wife-beaters, small-time hustlers, whores, and even pigeon-droppers. This alone would have drawn me little enough custom, but it was said, further, and experience proved it true, that the Yankee did his work for free, a very ancient mariner of Yankee lawyers doomed to work out his penance for bird mangling or beast thumping by giving away his services to whatever Negro showed up with a likely story. It was said that if you had no likely story, he would help you make one up—not inciting to perjury, you realize. Only fooling with the facts in such a way as to produce a story diverting enough to keep the judge from adding a month or so to your sentence for the boredom you caused him in addition to the inconvenience of having to keep court for the likes of you. All that aside, I seduced by asking no fee. It was at first amazing to me how a Negro was willing often to take a chance of six months or a year in jail to avoid a fifty-dollar fee, even when he had it. For some reason I could not at first grasp, my own logic had no purchase with them. Think: suppose a man offered you free legal service. Wouldn't you, like me, presume that the service would be about worth the price? Yes, you would. But how do you suppose the blacks reasoned? One of my chicken —actually, a pig—thieves explained why he trusted me. You got a nice house, ain't you? Yes, I said. You out of jail yourself, ain't you? Yes. You look like you eats pretty good. I do, I eat very well. Except no pork. No saturated fats. Huh? Never mind. Oh, religion, huh? All right. Anyhow, if you got a good house, if you look like eating regular, and if the judge let you stand up there, you got as much going for you as any jakeleg courthouse chaser I seen.

It was that very pig-robber who carried me down to town one day in search of a law book. Something to do with statute of limitations on pig thievery. It seems that my man was charged with having stolen a pig in 1959, the loss or proof of it having come to light only in the last few days. I wanted to make absolutely sure that there was not some awful exception to ordinary prescription in Mississippi law when the subject was pigs. There are some oddities in Texas law having to do with horses. I had never had much practice connected with livestock in Manhattan. I thought I had better make sure.

So I was directed by a deputy, who was everlastingly amused by the nature and style of my practice, to the offices of Mr. Grierson.

They were on a side street just beyond the business district. Among some run-down houses that must have been neat and even prime in the 1920s but which had lost paint and heft and hope in the 1950s at the latest, there was a huddle of small stores. A place that sold seed and

fertilizer and cast-iron pots and glazed clay crocks that they used to make pickles in. Just past the pots and crocks, there was a flat-roofed place with whitewashed doors and one large window, heavy curtains behind it, across which was painted

FREE CHURCH OF THE OPEN BIBLE

There was a hasp on the door with a large combination lock hanging through it. I wondered what might be the combination to the Open Bible.

Just past the church, there was another storefront building standing a little to itself. There was a runway of tall weeds and grass between it and the church and it was set back a little from the sidewalk with a patch of tree-lawn in front. On either side of the door was a huge fig tree, green and leafy and beginning to bear. Through the heavy foliage, I could see that there were windows behind the trees. They seemed to have been painted over crudely, so that they looked like giant blinkered eyes which had no wish to see out into the street. Above the door itself was a sign made of natural wood hanging from a wrought-iron support. On it was graved in faded gold letters cut down into the wood

W. C. GRIERSON
Atty at Law

The door itself was recessed fairly deeply and I got the notion that it was not the original door, that it had nothing really to do with the building, which was, like those nearby, simply a long frame affair—what they—we—call a shotgun building, although much wider and longer. I stood there in the early summer sun looking at that door as if it were the entrance to another place. Why? I rubbed my chin and I thought, and then I found, back in the fine debris of my old life, back behind the sword-edge of my coronary, the recollection of another summer afternoon spent with a lovely woman at some gallery, some wealthy home—somewhere. We had gone to see paintings, and there had been one among all the others that I could not put out of mind. It had been by the Albrights, those strange brothers. Of a door massive and ancient, buffed and scarred, the very deepest symbol both of life and of the passage through which life itself must pass. On its weather-beaten panels hung a black wreath, each dark leaf pointed as a spike, shimmering in the mist of its own surreality. My God, I remembered thinking, is death like that? Is it finally a door with a wreath standing isolated from air and grass—even from the materials which are supposed to surround the fabric of a door? And then I thought, the lovely

woman beside me talking still about a Fragonard she had spotted nearby, of Rilke's words "Der grosse Tod. . . . —The great Death each has in himself, that is the fruit round which all revolves. . . ." But the title of the painting was *That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do*, and I could find neither sweetness nor rest in that.

Later, when I had done with the lovely woman, I remember somehow managing to go back and see the painting again. It was evening then, winter I think, and whether in a museum or a private home (I could remember such things with perfect clarity before my heart failed me) I was alone, standing before it with the light soft and nothing but loneliness stalking the roofless windowless doorless wall-less room there with me.

I had gone back looking for some release from it, I think now. I had gone back not for appreciation—any more than one goes back to see Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece for reasons of art. I wanted to find the key to that door—the flaw, the crack in its reality. To be free of the Albrights and their loathsome portal, I had to find, somewhere in the canvas, a false note, a tiny piece of sentimentality or stupidity. But there was nothing. The weather of the painting was unfathomable. It did not change. Even with the summer brightness purged from the room, it was the same—as if the door, the wreath, the very canvas had the power to absorb or reject exterior light so as to keep the painting always within that awful twilight which flowed like sidereal influence out of the door's dead center—the wreath which lay hanging against it like a demonic target or some emblem of absolutism linked with the imperturbable power of death itself.

Yes, I am still standing in front of that frame building in my town of Vicksburg, and yes, looking inward past the great fig trees at the shadowed door which now after all looks only the least bit like that other one, the weather, the light, the substantiality of all things being so much less dense. Reality spares us; we do not have to know what else there is very frequently, do we? A colored boy, no more than twelve, walked by in a polo shirt and worn corduroy pants. He exchanged a quick glance with me and stepped on past, a transistor radio hanging from his neck, a tiny tinny thing which crooned:

> *. . . looks like the end, my friend,*
> *got to get in the wind, my friend,*
> *These are not my people, no, no,*
> *these are not my people . . .*

Surely he had his radio aimed at me. How could he tell? And was the announcer a friend of his? He an agent of the station which had discovered me, an alien, waxing in their midst. All of this I thought in

jest, putting sudden flash-cuts of the Isenheim crucifixion out of mind, reaching for the doorknob, and stepping inside.

I do not know why I was not prepared. I should have been. No reason for me to suppose that a lawyer's office here, in an old frame building, would have the sort of Byzantine formality I remembered from New York. Receptionist, secretary, inner office—with possibly a young clerk interposed somewhere between. But the mind is stamped unalterably with such impressions when we have done business a certain way for a very long time.

So I was not prepared when Mr. Grierson turned in his chair and smiled at me and said, —Well, this is nice. Mighty nice. I don't know as I expected it.

—I beg . . . I began. Then I tried again. Best not beg. —I'm sorry. Have we met? Is it better to be sorry than to beg, I thought instantly. Too late.

—You'd be the lawyer just come down. Got you a house and everything.

My God, I thought, even a B-movie would tell you that things travel like lightning here. He probably knows what you paid for the lease, what you owe on the house if you pick up the option. Knows your last address, your last place of employ. Knows about your little chicken-thief cases, your car . . . I almost thought, about your coronary.

—Yes, I said, putting out my hand as he rose and offered his. —I'm Harry Cohen.

He motioned me to a chair near his desk and I sat down, trying as I did to begin the task of seeing him, of seeing this place in which he worked. Trying at the same time to put out of mind the impressions I had created, had begun to suppose from the moment the deputy had told me where to come. If we could only stay free of our own guesses, what would ever make us wrong in advance?

He walked over to a large safe against the wall to the left of the door. It was taller than he was, and the door opened slowly as he turned the handle. He stood reaching into its dark recesses, his back to me. I wondered what he was looking for as his voice came to me, small talk like a magician's patter, over his shoulder.

—Yes, Mr. Cohen. It's kind of you to pay a courtesy call. A custom languishing. Not dead, but in a bad way. A fine custom. Men who stand to the law shouldn't meet for the first time arguing a motion before Basil Plimsoll or one of the other boys on the circuit here . . .

I scanned the room as he spoke. I would deal with him later. It was a bright room—almost the opposite of what the door suggested. Or was it only the opposite of what the Albrights' door suggested?

On the wall over his flat desk, the shape and design of which had vanished long ago, I suspected, beneath a welter of papers and books, there were three old tintype portraits. Only they were not tintypes. They were fresh modern reproductions of tintypes. In the center, in a military uniform I almost recognized, was that stern beautiful face one recognizes without ever even having seen it. It was Lee. To his right, left profile toward me, hung that other one, that crafty rebel whose religion had almost severed the continent, Jackson. I did not know the third. He had a Tartar's face, long, bony, richly harsh—as if only in that uniform, only involved in that calling of arms, had his life meant anything to him at all. His eyes were straightforward and overpowering even at a hundred years' remove. And yet they were somehow at ease, their intensity more a matter of something evoked in the viewer than something essential to the eyes themselves. He had a high forehead, hair long, black, brushed back. His beard was a careless Vandyke, and the effect was that of seeing the man who had last closed the Albrights' door, nailed the wreath on it, and walked away, hands in uniform pockets. Whistling.

The rest of the room was austere and predictable. Near a long window there was a rocking chair done in some kind of chintz. Another table covered with papers. A third table in a corner with a coffeepot on it, a wine bottle or two, half a loaf of bread, and a plate upon which rested, glowing faintly, a large wedge of cheese. It looked like cheddar from where I sat. It was a room without quality—except for the portraits, which were, I thought, a ritual observance no more meaningful to this man whose life had been lived in another country than washing his face in the morning, spitting at noon, closing his eyes at night.

Mr. Grierson turned from the safe, hands filled with two tumblers and a dark brown bottle without a label. It had no cap. There seemed to be a cork stuck in it. He set all of it down on the edge of his desk and pulled the bottle's stopper with his teeth. The liquor was the lightest possible amber, a cataract of white gold as it twinkled into the glasses.

He smiled up at me. —You'll like it, he said. —Maybe not this time. But you let me send you a couple bottles. You'll come to like it.

—Corn, I said.

—Surely. Comes from upstate. Costs more than it used to. Bribes are just like the cost of living.

I sat back and sipped a little. It was peculiar, nothing like store whiskey, really. It was a shock in the mouth, vanished as you swallowed. Then it hit the pit of your stomach and paralyzed you for the briefest moment. Then great warmth, a happiness that spoke of cells receiving gifts, of veins moving to a new rhythm, muscles swaying like grain in a breeze-swept field. It was lovely. Nothing like whiskey. More like

sipping the past, something intangible that could yet make you feel glad that it had been there.

Mr. Grierson sat watching me now. As I took another swallow, deeper this time, I watched him back. A man of middle height, aged now but hale. Steel-rimmed glasses revealing large innocent blue eyes that seemed never to have encountered guile. He had that almost cherubic look that one associates with country doctors—or, in certain cases, with Southern politicians. He wore an old suede coat cut for hunting. I had never seen anything like it. It was a soft umber and fit as if it had been his own pelt originally.

—Your jacket, I couldn't help saying, feeling the whiskey lift me and waft me toward him, toward his smile. —Could I get one . . .

—At Lilywhite's, he said.

—Here?

—London, he said apologetically. —And even there back in 1949. I wouldn't reckon they make 'em like this anymore.

He wasn't putting me on, I could tell. But I could tell too that he enjoyed that level of conversation. It pleased him to please with pleasantries. One moves from one series of set exchanges to another. An infinite series. And when the last series is exhausted, it is either time to go, or you have lived out your life and death clears its throat, almost loath to interrupt, and says that it is time. I thought I would not want to go on like that.

Did I tell you that, on the far side of the coronary (O God, how that word has come to press me with its softness, its multiple implications. Corona. Carnal. Coronary. A place, a name, the vaguest warm exhalation glimmering from an eclipsed sun. Shivering golden and eternal around the glyph of a saint. Called then a Glory. I lay for weeks thinking Coronary, wondering when it would reach into my chest once more and squeeze ever so gently and bring out with its tenderness my soul, toss that gauzy essence upward like a freed dove to fly outward, past morning, past evening, past the blue sky into the glistening midnight blue of deep space, and past that even to the place where souls fly, shaking great flakes of its own hoarded meaning outward, downward on all suns and the worlds thereunder.) I had had a certain gift with exceptionally sharp teeth. Yes, I had been cruel. I had enjoyed finding certain lawyers in the opposition, men I had known who were blessed with a kind of unwillingness to go for blood. They worked within the confines of their dignity, their gentleness, their inadequacy. But I worked elsewhere and won invariably. But such work tightens the viscera. One cannot play bloodster without gradually coming to possess the metabolism of a jaguar, a predator. Was it imagination, or did I come to see better in the dark as I aged in my profession? Was I a little mad,

or did I move more smoothly? Did my walk take on a certain ease, a bit of stealth? Did I smile with that humorless lynx-eyed expression that flows from the second sight of the killer? If it had not been for my success, I would have gone to a psychiatrist saying, Doctor, there is in me a germ and I fear it grows. Watch your throat, Doctor. What? Yes, I invent metaphors for killing. I am not psychopathic. Never that, not at all. No, I must kill without killing. I am a child of the century. Do you understand?

But Coronary came upon me, slackened the knotted nerves, the plaited muscles. I cannot say if I look younger or older now, but I am much different. I do not—no, will not—want to pursue and strike and rend. I am more peaceful. I want to do my part. And what is my portion will come to me. It is chess after professional football. But, even so, not Mr. Grierson's gambit, not at his tempo. Though even as I looked at his pink uncreased face and considered the folds and inlets of the world behind him, I wondered if his pleasantries, his kindliness were not analogous to mine. What if one has, in passion or confusion, or as habit, taken men of another hue out and strung them to a near tree? What if that is how, for a small age, we have shaken from ourselves that rage that can tear a whole society to pieces? Suppose, from outside, something like Coronary should come? What might we do in the shadow of knowing that we cannot ever lynch again on pain of dying? Chess, after all, is a pleasantry profoundly complicated, Byzantine in its intricacies. Is there something in this?

—Another little drink, Mr. Grierson suggested. —I believe you've already found something in it.

—I was thinking . . . of martinis.

—No comparison. Next step from corn would be . . . perhaps a pipe of opium.

I did not even wonder if he spoke from experience or from some book by Sax Rohmer. I wanted to go on.

—Mr. Grierson, I wonder if you have the *Southwest Reporter* from . . .

He poured each of us another glass. —I have it all, he said. —I think my . . . library will fill your . . .

I looked around. There was a single bookcase across the room, and only a handful of books in it. I must have looked doubtful. He gave me the oddest of small glances, and I took refuge in my whiskey.

—Maybe we should go on into the library, he said, rising and walking toward a door at the back of the room which I had not even noticed until now. It was painted the same dull color as the rest of the office. There was a hook nailed badly to the door with coats and jackets and what looked like an old fishing hat hanging from it.

I followed him and stepped ahead of him as he opened the door.

What shall I say? I have to tell you that Coronary fluttered not far away, and I stepped in and turned in the new room slowly, slowly, taking it in, feeling, thinking in a simultaneity resembling that first moment of the attack.

So this is what lies behind them, Southerners. There is always that front room, the epitome of the ordinary, a haven for bumpkins. And behind, in one way, one sense or another, there is always this. No wonder even the most ignorant of them is more complex, more intricate than I have ever been. They stand upon this. This is behind them, within them. My God, what does that make . . . us?

Because it was, properly speaking, not a room. No, many rooms. It went on, back at least four more rooms and perhaps side rooms off each of the main rooms toward the back. And I knew without even entering the others that they were all more or less like this one I was standing in.

Filled from floor to roof with books. Thousands upon thousands of books. Books in leather and buckram, old, new, burnished bindings and drab old cloth. Behind and around the shelves the walls were paneled in deepest cherry wood. Before me was a beautiful nineteenth-century library table surrounded by chairs. It was like the rare book room of a great private library. I moved spellbound toward the nearest shelf. It was . . . religion. What was not there? Josephus. The Fathers in hundreds of volumes. The Paris edition of Aquinas. Was this a first of the Complutensian Polyglot? Scrolls in ivory cases. Swedenborg, Charles Fort. A dissolving Latin text from the early seventeenth century. The *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola,* Marcion, Tertullian. And I could see that the rest of the room was of a kind with those I was looking at.

—I had a house once, Mr. Grierson was saying. —But even then it didn't seem fitting to have all this stuff out where my clients could see it. Folks here can abide a lot of peculiarity, but you ought not to flaunt it. You want to keep your appetites kind of to yourself.

This in a deprecating voice, as if possession of books, especially in great number, was somehow a vice—no, not a vice, distinctly not a vice, but an eccentricity that must disturb the chicken thief or the roughneck with a ruptured disk. Was it a kindness to spare them this?

—I think you'll find most anything you'll need here, Mr. Grierson said softly. —Except for science. Not much science. Darwin, Huxley, Newton—all the giants. I kind of gave up when they went to the journals. They stopped doing books, you know.

—Yes, I said. Still thinking, this is where the Southerners have stored it all. You ask, how could Faulkner . . . how could Dickey . . . down here, in this . . . place . . . ? This is how.

I knew that this was madness. I did not question that. This time, had there been a psychiatrist close by, I would have gone to him at once without a doubt. Because, after all, this was not what I thought, but worse: what I felt. I *knew* it was not so, and still I *believed* it.

—This is where I do . . . my work, Mr. Grierson was saying.

—Work, I repeated as we entered another room filled with literature. All of it. My hand fell on a shelf filled with French. Huysmans, Daudet, de Musset, Mérimée—and a large set of portfolios. They were labeled simply Proust. I took one out. It was bound in a gray cloth patterned in diamond-shaped wreaths, each filled with star-like snowflakes, smaller wreaths, featherlike bursts gathered at the bottom, nine sprays flaring at the top.

—It was the wallpaper, Mr. Grierson was saying. —That pattern . . .

I opened the portfolio. In it were printed sheets covered with scrawling script, almost every line of print scratched out or added to.

—Proofs. Of *Du côté de chez Swann.* I was in Paris . . . in 1922. Gide . . . anyhow, I came across . . .

—Of course. You've studied them?

—Oh yes. The Pleiade text isn't . . . quite right.

We went on for a long time, shelf by shelf. But we did not finish. We never finished. It could have taken weeks, months, so rich was his treasure.

I left at dusk with Grierson seeing me to the door, inviting me back soon, offering me the freedom of his library. I was back home sitting under my arbor with whiskey and a carafe of water on a small table beside me before I recalled that I had never gotten around to checking in the Mississippi code as to its position on pigs and those who made off with them.

The pig had prescribed, sure enough. But on the way out of court, I found myself involved in another case dealing, if you will, with similar matters.

They were bringing in a young man in blue jeans, wearing a peculiar shirt made of fragments, rags—like a patchwork quilt. He had very long hair like Prince Valiant, except not so neat. He was cuffed between two deputies. One, large with a face the color of a rare steak, kept his club between the young man's wrists, twisting it from time to time. There seemed somehow to be an understanding between them: the deputy would twist his club viciously; the young man would shriek briefly. Neither changed his expression during this operation.

—What did he do, I asked the other deputy who looked much like a young Barry Fitzgerald.

—That sonofabitch *cussed* us, he told me with that crinkly simian smile I had seen in *Going My Way*. —We should of killed him.

—Local boy, I asked.

—You got to be shitting me, he answered, watching his partner doing the twist once more. —He's some goddamned Yankee. Michigan or New York, I don't know. We should of killed him.

—Did you find anything in his car?

—Car your ass. He was hitching out on U.S. 80. We better not of found anything on him. I know I'd of killed him for sure. I can't stand it, nobody smoking dope.

—What's the charge?

—Reviling, he said, eyes almost vanishing in that attenuated annealed Mississippi version of an Irish grin. —Two counts.

—Two?

—We was both there. He was vile to Bobby Ralph and me both.

—What did he say?

—Wow, Barry Fitzgerald's nephew crinkled at me. —We should of killed him and dumped him in Crawfish Creek.

—What?

—Pigs.

—Sorry?

—You heard. Called us—Bobby Ralph and me—pigs. My God how do you reckon we kept off of killing him?

I think it was a question of free association. Pigs. I had had luck with pigs so far. Maybe this Yankee sonofabitch—pardon me—was sent for my special care. God knows the care he would get otherwise. Just then Barry's partner gave the young man a final supreme wrench. He came up off the floor of the courthouse hallway at least three feet. He squealed and looked at me with profound disgust.

—You old bastard, he drawled, hunching his shoulders, —would you let 'em book me so I can get these things off?

—I'm a lawyer, I said.

—You're fucking bad news, the young man said wearily.

—See, Barry said, as his partner shoved the young man down the hall toward the booking room. —Reckon we ought to take him back out and lose him?

—No, I said. —You don't want to do that.

—No, Barry said, walking after his partner and their day's bag. —No, you lose him and the feds shake all the feathers out of your pallet looking for him. Christ, all you have to do to make him important is lose him. Or paint him black.

—You leave the ninety-nine lambs and seek the one that's lost, I said, striving for his idiom.

—Anyone does that is a goddamned fool, Barry said over his shoulder. —And he's going to be out of the sheep business before he knows it. Lost is lost.

Later—you guessed it—he sent for me. On the theory that I seemed to be the only one in the town able to speak English as he knew it, as opposed to lower Mississippian. We talked in a corner of his cell. There was a sad Mexican and a local drunk in the cell with him. The three had reached a kind of standoff between them. None could understand the others. Each seemed weird to the others. Since they had no weapons and were roughly the same size, an accommodation had been arranged. No one would begin a fight which could not be handicapped.

His name was Rand McNally. He might have been a nice-looking young man if he had wanted to be. But he was not. His eyes were circled, his skin dry and flaked. I could not tell precisely what color his hair was. He had a small transistor radio the size of a cigarette pack stuck in the pocket of his shirt. It was tuned to a local rock music station:

> *She's got everything she needs,*
> *She's an artist,*
> *She don't look back . . .*

—The Spic stinks and the redneck keeps puking over there in the corner, Rand McNally told me. —But that's all right. I've got it coming. I deserve it. Jesus, I wish I'd kept my mouth shut.

—Or stayed out of Mississippi.

—It was an accident, Mississippi.

—Some say that, I told him.

—Oh shit. I mean being here. I was running away from a . . . girl. It came up Mississippi.

—Where are you from?

He sat back and fingered his essay at a beard. It was long and a kind of dark red. I supposed his hair was probably the same color if it was washed. The beard was sparse, oriental. Above it, he had large green eyes which somehow gave me a start each time I looked squarely into them. I am not used to being put off by a physical characteristic, but those eyes, deeply circled, seemed to demand a concentration and attention I had no wish to muster. They seemed, too, to require the truth. Not knowing the truth, I evaded such demands whenever possible. I wished I had let him pass on with Barry Fitzgerald's kinsman and his partner. No, I didn't.

—I don't know, Rand McNally said. —From one place after another. I just remember serial motels and rooming houses. The old man was an automobile mechanic. I never had the idea it started anywhere. I mean, it had to start somewhere. I got born, didn't I? But I remember it being one dump after another forever. Al's Garage, BoPeep Motel; Fixit Tire Company, Millard's Auto Court; Willie's Car Repair, Big Town Motor Hotel. Somewhere the old man had a woman and she had me—told him I was his—and then on to the next place. She dropped off somewhere. I think he whipped up on her. I seem to remember something. About money? Sure, probably. I don't remember her.

I saw his father, a great tall harried man with grease worked permanently into the skin of his knuckles, under his fingernails, with the soul of Alice's white rabbit, an ancient Elgin running fast in his pocket, and a notebook listing all the small towns, garages, and motels he was obliged to move through before it was done. One entry said: *Get Son*. Another said: *Son Grown. Leaves*. There were faded, smeared pencil checks beside each entry. Life lived between Marvin Gardens and Reading Railroad.

—How do you want to plead? I asked him.

He shrugged. —Make it easy on yourself. I've got a couple of months to do here. Price of pork.

I had not thought him intelligent enough to have a sense of humor. We smiled at each other then. The transistor was quacking another of its vast repertoire of current tunes:

These are not my people,
No, no, these are not my people.
Looks like the end, my friend,
Got to get in the wind, my friend . . .

—I'm going to plead you innocent. No malice.

He tossed his hair back and smiled up at me. His green eyes seemed to hang on mine for a long while. It surprised me that someone so worn, so ground off by the endless procession of new people in his life could reach across to the latest in that anonymous parade with even the appearance of interest.

—No malice, he said. —That's true.

It was late that evening when the phone rang. At the other end was Billy Phipps, one of the county attorney's assistants. His voice was lazy with an undertone of something like amusement or exultation. I did not like him. He was provincial as a Bronx delivery man and took pleasure in the webbing of paltry law as it snared those who had not the slightest

idea of its working. His own ignorance made him delight in that of others.

—Well, what do you think of your boy Rand McNally? he asked.

—Not a lot, I said, wondering why he would bother with a call on such a matter —It seems silly to put him on the county for a little mild name-calling. Hadn't you ought to leave room for rape-murderers?

At the other end of the line, I could hear Phipps draw in his breath.

I pause only to say that I neither believe nor disbelieve in magic, precognition, spiritualism, and so on. I am not prejudiced. But I come to feel that all we do in the four dimensions of our world is like the action of water beetles skating on the surface of a still lake, turning our tricks between water and air, resident truly, fully, in neither, committed vaguely to both. Are we material—or other? I receive hints from varied sources. If you have loitered at the gates of Coronary, you must wonder. Is a massive heart seizure only a statistically predictable failure of meat-mechanism? Could it be counted a spiritual experience? Who, what seizes the heart? Who, what attacks the heart? Could it be an entrance into the indices of those currents which play above and below the beetle, in the great eternal world where there are neither serials, sequences nor statistics? Where forever, possibly, dear God and his precious Adversary choose to disagree as to the purpose of their copulation? At my worst—or best?—moments, I seem to hear, like a radio signal from the most remote reaches of time and space, the voices of the Entities making their cases over and over, yet never the same, because each permutation is a case unto itself. Is it the voice of God one hears, arguing point by point, A to B to C, coolly, without rancor or regret—like Herman Kahn? Is it Satan who sobs and exults, demands, entreats, laughs, chides, tears a passion, and mutters sullenly? Or are those voices reversed? Maybe I am gulled, believing in polarities. Why not? Could not God howl and sob the Natural Order of Normal Occasions, while Satan urges quietly the Stewing Urgencies of Madness? Why not? And why should we not in one way or another receive darts and splinters from those age-long and intricate arguments?

So much to explain my mind as I heard Phipps draw in his breath. *Jesus*, I thought, *a message*.

—What did he tell you? Phipps asked quietly, his normal sneering country manner gone altogether.

—Nothing, I said. —What do you mean?

—Counselor, we got a telegram from Shreveport. They want to talk to Pig-Boy. About a rape-murder.

—Ah, I said, and felt those faintest stirrings in my chest. Not even a warning, only the dimmest—can I say, sweetest—touch of recollection, of terrible nostalgia, from the distant geographies of Coronary. Like the

negative of a photograph of a memory, saying: This twinge, this whisper, is what you felt without noticing before you came that day for the first time upon the passage to Coronary. Be warned and decide. Is it a landscape you wish to visit again? Is it, pulsing once more, a place where gain out measured loss? Stroke the contingencies and wonder your way to a decision. You have been once across the bourn from which few travelers return. Do you have it for another trip? And will that trip too be round?

—Ah, I said again to Phipps. —Let me get back to you, all right? It was all right. Spatially, Rand McNally was fixed. This allowed certain latitude with time. Tomorrow would be just fine. Since the rape-murder, evocation of a nameless victim cooling after life's fitful fever 350 miles away in North Louisiana, was fixed irrevocably in time and there could be, for those to whom its being was announced, no moving from it even as it receded backward and away now, one more permutation in the patterns spoken of in that bower where God and His Son ramble on to no probable conclusion.

Is it strange to say that, after the call from Phipps, I found myself thinking less of the long-haired boy than before? Before, I had been searching for a way to free him from, at most, a three-month term in jail. Now, when he might stand within the shadow of death or a lifetime in prison, he seemed somehow less a point of urgency. Perhaps because I believed not only that he had committed that rape-murder in another place and time, but that he had, in passage from one serial point called Shreveport to another called Vicksburg—both noted as mandatory in a book like his father had been slave to—placed upon that act, called rape-murder by authorities who have the legal right to give comings-together names and sanctions, his own ineradicable mark: a fingerprint, a lost cap, one unforgettable smile caught by a barmaid in a café as he passed toward or from the fusion with another—presumably female—in that timetable inherited from his father, and for all either I or he could say, from the very Adam of his blood. However that might be, there was no hurry now. Ninety days in the county jail, so implacable only a little while before, no longer mattered. Which called to my mind, making me laugh inordinately, that on the day of Coronary I had developed a painful hangnail, had given it much thought. Until it vanished in the wilderness of my new world. Had it healed in the hospital? One presumed. I could not recall it after I had stepped out of that world in which one nags for the sake of a hangnail. It is a question of magnitude. When Coronary came, I was transformed into one who, having disliked mosquito bites, now used the Washington Monument for a toothpick. Mosquitoes, landing, would fall to their deaths in the vastness of a single

pore. And later, drinking off my bourbon and water and sugar, I slept without dreams. Or, as I am told, dreaming constantly, but remembering none when it came time to awaken.

—I hear you reached in for a kitty and caught yourself a puma, my telephone was saying.

It was Mr. Grierson calling. He wanted to know if he could be of assistance.

—Seeing you hadn't figured on anything quite like this, he said blandly.

—Yes, I told him. Hell yes. Only small boys and large fools stand alone when they might have allies. Anyhow, I thought, McNally will barely have representation anyhow: a heart patient obsessed with the exotica of his complaint; an old man gone bibliophile from sheer loneliness. We would see.

We did. It was noon when we got in. Rand McNally stared out at the jailer in whose eyes he had obviously gained status. When he opened the cell, he loosened the strap on his ancient pistol. *This here bastard is a killer,* I could almost hear him thinking.

Mr. Grierson hitched up his pants, passed his hand over his thin hair, and sat down on a chair the jailer had provided for him. I made do with the seat of the toilet. Mr. Grierson studied the boy for a moment, then looked at me expectantly, as if protocol required that I begin. I nodded, returning the compliment to my elder. I had divined already how such things would move in Mississippi. Mr. Grierson returned my nod and cleared his throat.

—Well, sir, it appears that clandestine hog-calling is the least of your problems.

Rand McNally stared at him in astonishment. Then he laughed, looked at me, saw me smile despite myself. He went on laughing while Mr. Grierson sat quietly, an expression bemused and pleasant on his face

—I'm glad you got such a fine spirit, son. You're gonna need it. Rand McNally took the earplug of his transistor out and hung it through the spring of the empty bunk above his. The Mexican and the farmer were gone now. Perhaps released to the terrors and punishment of sobriety; perhaps simply transferred to other cells in honor of Rand McNally's new status.

—Huh? McNally said to Mr. Grierson.

—If you did to that lady in Shreveport what they say you did, you're gonna have a chance to stand pat whilst they strap you in the electric chair. Shave your head, I believe, before you go.

Rand McNally shuddered. Whether it was the standing pat, the chair, or the head shaving I could not tell.

—Well, Mr. Grierson asked him. —What about it?

Yes. Well, he told us. He was glad it was over; was tired of running. (—Sonofabitch only did what he did three days ago, Mr. Grierson observed later. —What do you reckon? Think he's been reading *Crime and Punishment*?) He had gone to work for an elderly widow in Shreveport, cut the yard for a meal, hung a shelf for a dollar, and come back the next day to whitewash a fence for two dollars. Had white-washed most of the day with her looking on from her kitchen window past the blooming wisteria and lazy bees. Near sundown, covered with sweat and whitewash, he had gone inside to get a glass of ice water and his two dollars. As he drank, the woman squinted out at the fence, saying, —It'll take another coat. —Huh? Rand McNally said. —Another coat. Then I'll pay you, she said softly, smirking at him, some last wilted, pressed, and dried wisp of her ancient femininity peeking through. At the very worst time.

She said something else that he could not remember and he picked up a knife with which she had been dicing peaches and pushed it into her throat. Then he pushed her over on the kitchen table, pulled off her clothes and down his pants, made with that agonized and astonished crone the beast with two backs, blood, coughing, and great silence between them. In retrospect, he was mildly surprised by it all. It was not, he told us, a planned happening. He was curious that, following the knife, he had discovered himself erect. Why he pressed on with it, distasteful and grotesque as it was, he could not say. But when he was done—he did get done, by the way—he found that she was still very much alive, admonishing him with one long bony liver-spotted finger.

So he got the remainder of the whitewash, dragged it back into the house in a huge wallpaper-paste bucket while he held up his pants with one hand. While she lay there mute, violated, bleeding, he whitewashed the kitchen: the walls, floor, cabinets, stove, icebox, calendar, and four-color lithograph of Jesus suffering the little children. Chairs, hangers, spice rack, coffee, tea, sugar and flour bins, breadbox, and cookie jar. All white. At last he rolled her off onto the floor, whitewashed the table, and put her back in the middle of it. After studying it all for a moment, he decided, and whitewashed her too. Which, so far as he could remember, was all he could remember.

—Ummm, Mr. Grierson said. —So she was alive when you were done with your fooling?

—Alive and kicking, Rand McNally said without smiling. —You see I got to die, don't you?

—Well, Mr. Grierson said, looking at me, —you ain't done much by way of making a case against that. Do you want to die?

— Everybody wants to die, Rand McNally said. He was picking his toes, disengaged now, considering certain vastnesses he had talked himself to the edge of.

—Right. At the proper place and time. How do you like the Chair?

—Ride the lightning? What a gas, Rand McNally almost smiled. —Anybody'd do that to an old lady has got to pay the price. You know that's so. The price is lightning in this state.

—Well, Mr. Grierson said, getting up stiffly. —Let me study on it, son. I'll see you.

As we left, Rand McNally was screwing the transistor's plug into his ear. —Christ, he said, —a sonofabitch would do that has got to die.

Outside, we passed Billy Phipps talking to a couple of police we didn't know. Phipps nodded to us. I supposed they were from Shreveport.

—Do you smell Rand McNally . . .

— . . . sneaking up on an insanity plea, Mr. Grierson finished my sentence. —Indeed I do.

—It looks good. From slimy start to filthy finish, doesn't it?

—Ummmm, Mr. Grierson hummed, smiling. —All he's got to do is convince a jury he's Tom Sawyer . . .

— . . . and she was Becky Sharp . . . ?

He looked at me sorrowfully and shook his head as if only a Yankee would have pressed it that awful extra inch. —Thatcher, he said. —But there is a question still . . .

— . . . ?

—If he *is* trying to get himself decked out with an insanity plea, the question is, *why* did he kill the old lady, and then do that to her? If he hadn't, he wouldn't need any kind of plea at all, would he?

That afternoon under the scuppernongs I felt as if I were waiting for some final word, some conclusive disposition of my own case. There was a dread in me, an anxiety without an object. I thought ceaselessly of Rand McNally and his insane erection in the midst of an act of violence. I thought of his surprise at it. I thought of my own prophecy over the phone to Phipps. What had brought him to this place, this conclusion? He had stepped from life into process: extradition, arraignment, indictment, trial, sentencing. I came to feel that he had ceased to exist, to be a human being owed and owing. He was no longer a proper object of feeling. Now one only *thought* about him. One took him into account along with Dr. Crippen, Charles Starkweather, Bruno Hauptmann,

Richard Speck, and the others of that terrible brotherhood whose reality is at once absolute and yet moldering day by month by year in antique police archives or grinning dustily in the tensionless shadows of wax museums.

It was just after supper when Mr. Grierson appeared. He pulled into the drive in a 1941 Ford Super DeLuxe coupe. It was jet black and looked as if it had been minted—not built, minted—an hour or so before. He wore a white linen suit and a peculiar tie: simply two struts of black mohair which lay beneath and outlined the white points of his narrow shirt collar. It was not that his car and clothes were old-fashioned; it was that while they were dated, they were not quaint or superannuated or amusing. As if by some shift Mr. Grierson had managed the trick of avoiding the lapse of time, of nullifying it so that what had been remained, continued unchanged. Could one pile up the past densely enough around himself so as to forbid its dwindling? And what would happen if the rest of us shared that fierce subterranean determination to drag down the velocity at which today became yesterday? It would fail, of course. You cannot disintegrate the fabric of physics. But what would happen?

We spoke of the weather, hot and dry, the bane of planters hereabouts. No sweet June rain. Only scorching sun, the river lying like a brown serpent between us and those like us in Louisiana. It was the mention of Louisiana that Mr. Grierson chose as his pathway past the amenities.

—He's crossing the big river tomorrow. Waived extradition.

—Oh? Did you . . . ?

—Talk to him again? Oh yes. Surely.

He smiled at me, knowing what thoughts had crossed my mind and instantly been dropped as I asked my question.

—He was forcefully apprised of his rights. Not once, but several times. And he repudiated every one of them in obscene terms.

—What? I don't . . .

—He said it was a goddamned piss-poor legal system that gave all these rights to a . . . fucking pervert.

Mr. Grierson looked embarrassed for the sake of the quotation.

—Jesus, I said, almost dropping the bottle of sour mash from which I was pouring our drinks. —Christ, he *is* crazy. He *must* have been reading Dostoevsky.

—I don't know, Mr. Grierson said. —He gave me this. Said it was your fee.

He handed me a greasy fragment of oiled paper—the kind they wrap hamburgers in. There was what looked like a quatrain scrawled on it in No. 1 pencil:

> *It's bitter knowledge one learns from travel,*
> *The world so small from day to day,*
> *The horror of our image will unravel,*
> *A pool of dread in deserts of dismay.*

—What's that? I asked Mr. Grierson. He smiled and sipped his whiskey.

—You can come over to my place and look it up, he said. —The idea is interesting. Wine don't travel well.

— . . . the horror of our image . . .

—Seems what broke him up was that business after he stabbed the old lady. He didn't seem much concerned about the stabbing, you know. It was . . . the other.

—And the finale . . . ?

—The whitewashing? Oh no, he liked that fine. You can't make up for it, he told me. But you do the best you can. That boy is a caution . . .

We sat drinking for a while. I shook my head and said, not so much to Mr. Grierson as to myself, —It's . . . as if Rand McNally were a . . . historical figure.

—Well, yes. That's so. But then, we all are.

—Yes . . .

—But history ain't like grace, is it? It has different rules. Which is to say, no rules at all.

I stared at him. Grace? What might that be? Luck? Fortune? I had heard the word. I simply attached no meaning to it. Now this old man set it before me as an alternative to history. I felt that dread again, some low order of clairvoyance wherein I imagined that Coronary might open once more: at first like the tiny entrance to Alice's garden—then like the colossal gates of ancient Babylon. It struck me at that instant with ghastly irrationality that grace was the emanation of vaginal purpose and womb's rest. Is grace death?

—Is grace death? I heard myself asking aloud.

—It could be, Mr. Grierson answered. —I can imagine in a few years I might ask for that grace. But not altogether. History is the law. Grace is the prophets. History comes upon us. I reckon we have to find grace for ourselves. The law works wrath rather than grace, Luther said.

—That line . . . the horror of our image . . .

—Yes. Well, that's what brought grace to my mind. I think that boy has just broke into and out of history.

—. . . ?

—Something else I remember from Luther: certain it is that man must completely despair of himself in order to become fit to receive the grace of Christ . . .

—I didn't know you were a Lutheran.

—Hell, I'm not. Never could be. Most often, I quote Calvin. But you always go for water out of the sweetest well, don't you?

—You mean Rand McNally doesn't care anymore? He's done with the motels, the garages?

—No and yes. He cares all right. He wants to get on with it, don't you see? He's sick of problems. But no, there won't be any more motor courts and repair shops for old Rand McNally.

—Problems . . .

—What happened to him that evening in that old woman's kitchen? Do you know? How is it that killing moved to something like what they call an act of love? Neither fit the hour's need. What happened? That's the problem.

I felt very warm, my face flushed, my hands wet as if I had just climbed out of the river. Believe me, I was afraid. I thought it was another attack. They call the coming of Coronary an attack. Tryst might be better. Liaison, assignation.

—You feeling bad? Mr. Grierson asked, pouring us both a little more whiskey.

—No, I lied. —I'm fine. Just thinking. Was it grace that came on Rand McNally? Is that what you want to say?

—Lord no, Mr. Grierson smiled deprecatingly. —That'd be crazy. Grace to kill and rape an old woman? Naw, I never said that. I wasn't speaking *for* grace, you know.

—He's insane. They'll find him insane.

—Sure. So was Joan of Arc. So was Raymond of Toulouse . . .

—Raymond . . . ?

—A hobby of mine, he spread his hands. —I take on old cases sometimes. Not Joan. She's all right, taken care of. But Raymond . . .

Who was an Albigensian—or at least no less than their defender in his province. Tormented by orthodox authorities most of his life, he died outside that grace which Rome claimed to purvey exclusively, and lay unburied in the charterhouse of the Hospitalers for 400 years. Mr. Grierson told me much more—told me that he had written a 300-page brief in Latin defending the acts and character of Raymond of Toulouse as those of a most Christian prince. But that was, he said, with a perfectly straight face, ancient history. He was working now on the defense of Anne Albright, a young girl burned during the Marian

persecutions at Smithfield in 1556. It was to be a class action, aimed at overturning the convictions of all those Protestants burned under Mary Tudor.

—What about the Catholics? I asked sardonically, draining my whiskey.

—Fisher, Southwell, Campion? No need. The world's good opinion justifies them. As well waste time on More or Beckett. No, I go for those lost to history, done to death with no posthumous justification.

—That's a mad hobby, I told him. Somehow his pastime made me angry. At first I supposed my anger came from the waste of legal talent that so many people needed—like Rand McNally. But no, it was deeper than that. Could it be that I, a child of history, descendant of those whom history had dragged to America, resented Grierson's tampering with the past? How many of yesterday's innocents, perjured to their graves, can we bear to have thrust before us? Isn't the evil in our midst sufficient unto the day?

—The past is past, I said almost shortly.

Mr. Grierson looked disgusted. —My Christ, he said. I had never heard him speak profanely before. —You sit under an arbor in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and say that? You better get hold of history before you go to probing grace.

We were quiet for a long while then, Grierson's breach of manners resting on us both. At last he left, walking slowly, stiffly out to that bright ancient automobile that came alive with the first press of the starter. I stood in the yard and watched him go, and found when I went into the house again that it was much later than I had thought.

I found myself gripped by a strange malaise the next day, and for weeks following I did no work. I walked amid the grassy park land of the old battlefields. I touched stone markers and tried to reach through the granite and marble to touch the flesh of that pain, to find what those thousands of deaths had said and meant. It was not the Northern soldiers I sought: history had trapped them in their statement. It had to do with the Union, one and indivisible, with equality and an end to chattel slavery. That was what they had said, whether they said it or not. But the Southerners, those aliens, outsiders, dying for slavery, owning no slaves; dying for the rights of states that had no great care for their rights. In the name of Death, which had engulfed them all, why?

But I could find nothing there. It was history, certainly: the moments, acts frozen in monuments, but it told me nothing. I could find nothing in it at all. One evening as the last light faded, I sat on a slope near the Temple of Illinois and wept. What did I lack? What sacred capacity for imagining had been denied me? Could I ever come to

understand the meaning of law, of life itself, if all history were closed to me?

Or was it not a lack but a possession which kept me from grasping the past as it presented itself, history as it laid down skein after skein of consuming time about us all? I imagined then that it was Coronary. That I had been drawn out of history, out of an intimacy with it by that assault. What was time or space to an anchorite who stared forever into forever? How could sequence matter to one who had touched All at Once? When I tried to concern myself with practical matters, I would remember Coronary and smile and withdraw into myself, forget to pay the net electric bill on time, suffering afterward the gross. Surely, I thought, I cannot care or be known within history because I am beyond it, a vestal of Coronary, graced with a large probable knowledge of how I will die. Knowing, too, that superflux of certain action can even hasten the day of that dying. I know too much, have been too deeply touched to succumb to history. I have no past, no particulars, no accidents. I am substance of flesh tenderly holding for an instant essence of spirit. I am escaping even as I think of it. Surely, I thought, a vision of one's dying must be grace. Yes, I am in grace, whatever that means.

Toward the end of some months of such odd consideration, I saw a small notice in a New Orleans paper that announced, purported to announce, the judgment of Louisiana on Rand McNally. He had been found incompetent to stand trial. Yes. The People had adjudged him insane. Not culpable. Simply a biological misstep within history. To be confined until the end of biology corrected the error of its beginning.

I found that I was sweating. As if in the presence of something immutable, and preternaturally awful. It had no name, and I could give it no shape. I began to reduce the feeling to an idea. Was I sorry? How is that possible? Capital punishment is a ghastly relic from past barbarism. To place a man in such a state that he knows almost to the moment the time of his death is . . .

Is what? The blessing of Coronary? My God, is it punishment or grace? I sat with my face in my hands, feeling my own doomed flesh between my fingers, trying to plumb this thing and yet trying not to let the juices of my body rise stormlike within, carrying me toward that dark port once more.

One evening a few weeks later, I drove downtown and bought two dozen tamales from a cart on a street corner. It was an indulgence, the smallest of sneers behind the back of Coronary. It was possible to go on with bland food and a rare glass of wine so long as the notion dangled there ahead that one day I would buy tamales and beer and risk all for a mouthful of pretended health.

I carried home my tamales, opened a beer, and began to eat with my fingers. The grease, the spices, the rough cornmeal, the harsh surface of the cheap beer. Before the attack, in New York, I would never have dreamed of eating such stuff, but to live in grace is to dare all things. Then I looked down at the faded stained palimpsest of the old newspaper. Above Captain Easy, next to the crossword puzzle, was a short article. It told of a suicide, that of a mad rapist-killer about to be sent to the State Hospital, how he had managed to fashion a noose of guitar strings and elevate himself by a steel support in the skylight.

It was Rand McNally, of course. No doubt enraged by a system so blind and feckless as to suffer his kind to live, a self-created lynch mob determined to do justice to himself. My hand trembled, spilling beer. A rapist-murderer will lead them, I think I thought. A little later that evening, my second cardiac arrest took place.

Dr. Freud, with the most fulsome humility, I say you should have been in there. You would have forgotten physiology: it was not the smooth agonized tissue of my heart which sent tearful chemicals upward to trek the barren steppes of my brain. No, in there, within the futureless glow of Coronary, I was constructing my soul. What, precisely, transpired there? Why should I not smile like Lazarus and suggest that the price of such knowledge is the sedulous management and encouragement of your own coronary involvement? Because I need to tell it. That is why we do things always, isn't it? Because we must. Not because we should. Which is what Rand McNally came to know, isn't it? And why he came to want death, demand punishment for himself, because he was no longer able to count on himself: what he did was outside any notion of *should*, was wholly given to *must*. Isn't that the way it is with animals?

But never mind. I am not guessing. That is part of what I have to tell you. I saw Rand McNally in there, and Joan of Lorraine, Raymond of Toulouse, and Anne Albright. All in Coronary, yes, Dr. Freud. Being a man dead, there is no reason one must honor time or space, chronology or sequence, in his hallucinations.

It was the Happy Isles, where I was, looking much like the country around Sausalito. There was worship and diversion, of course, and the smoky odor of terror. Two Mississippi deputies dragged Raymond before the Inquisition. Anne Albright was condemned once more for having denied the doctrine of Transubsegregation. They claimed that Joan had stolen something: Cauchon, pig? A Smithfield ham? Mary Tudor curtsied to Lester Maddox as they sat in high mahogany bleachers in Rouen's town square. Agnew preached against the foul heresies of all spiritual

mediums while shrouded Klansmen tied Rand McNally to a stake, doused him with whitewash, and set him afire.

I think I saw Jesus, now only an elderly Jew, in a side street weeping, blowing his nose, shaking his head as the Grand Inquisitor passed in triumphant procession, giving us both a piercing stare, blowing us kisses. Behind him in chains marched Giordano Bruno and John Huss, Mac Parker and Emmett Till. Savonarola was handcuffed to Malcolm X and Michael Servetus walked painfully, side by side with Bobby Hutton. The line went on forever, I thought, filled with faces I did not know: those who had blessed us with their pain, those suffering now, those yet to come. I wondered why I was not among them, but old Jesus, who was kind, and whom they ignored, said that there were those who must act and those who must see. It was given, God help me, that I should see.

There were other visions which I have forgotten or which I must not reveal. I saw, in the ecstasy of Coronary, the end of all things and was satisfied. It was only important that nothing be lost on my account. What does that mean?

—What does that mean? I asked Mr. Grierson when he came to the hospital to visit me, as soon as they allowed anyone to come at all.

—Ah, he said, his pink scalp glistening in the weak light above my bed. —Economy. You got to note all transmutations. Correct all falsehoods. Don't you see that? Lies, falsehoods, perversions of reality—those are man's sovereign capabilities. Only man can rend the fabric of things as they are. Nothing else in the universe is confused, uncertain, able to lie, except man. And through those lies, those rifts in reality, is where all things are wasted. But . . .

—But what . . . ?

—Well, Mr. Grierson smiled. —That's what my hobby is about.

—Your . . . cases . . . Anne Albright . . . ?

—Sure. No lie survives so long as the truth is stated. Those are the terms of the game.

—I don't see . . . what if people *believe* the lie . . . ?

—It doesn't matter. Tell the truth. Sooner or later that mere unprovable undefended assertion of the truth will prevail.

—How can you believe . . . ?

Mr. Grierson shrugged. —How not? We got all the time in the world. When the profit goes out of a lie, nobody wants to bother defending it any longer. That's where grace joins history, you see?

I did. I *did* see. He was right. A lie *couldn't* stand forever. Because there is no history so old, so impervious to revision that the simple truth doesn't establish itself sooner or later. Like gravity, the consequences of

truth can be avoided for a while. Sometimes a little while; sometimes a great while. But in the end, that which is false crumbles, falls away, and only the truth is left. So long as that truth has been once stated, no matter how feebly, under whatever pain.

—Yes, Mr. Grierson said quietly, taking a sheaf of yellowed papers out of his briefcase. —What with all the time you've got on your hands just now, I reckoned you just as well get started.

—Started . . . ?

He handed me the file. —In southern Texas, summer of 1892, there was this Mexican woman . . . they gave her something like a trial, then they went ahead and lynched her, which was what they had in mind all along. It was the late summer of 1892. There was a panic that year, a depression, some trouble in Pullman Town . . .

I lay back, eyes closed, veteran of trances. Why not tell you of one part of my final vision? Why not? Yes, I saw, larger than the sky, what they call the Sacred Heart, burning with love for all the universe. I saw its veins and arteries, how we every one moved through it and away again, the sludge of lies and torture and deceit choking its flow like cholesterol. I saw that heart shudder, pulse erratically. I saw the fibrillation of God's own motive center, and I cried out that I should share his pain, and rise to the dignity of sacrifice.

Yes, I came then to realize why Rand McNally had gone out of himself. In order to find himself. To tell the truth. Time matters only to liars, and they are, at last, worse than murderers, even rapists of old ladies. Because, caught in the grid of His truth, they yet try to evade, even as they see time vanishing before them. Grace is history transcendent, made true at last. And faith is the act of embracing all time, assured of renewing it, making the heart whole once more.

—It's an easy one, Mr. Grierson told me. —They did Rosa Gonzales wrong. You won't have any trouble . . .

I smiled and reached for the file.

—I don't think I'll ever have any real trouble again, I told him.