Bird-Self Accumulated

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Comerford is living in a hole he's dug in the strip of woods which runs behind Tucker's Pond.

That's what Rat says.

We are out in front of the drugstore, speeding still from that afternoon. At first, cars, as if in timed interval, come up from the factory road.

The sound of their doors—then emptied cans of beer or bottles banging in the wind across the lot.

Later, we drag old drums from the gas station. Rat stands before one and presses the lid of each eye closed. He throws a match into the paper and bits of trash. Behind him a stoplight sways and clicks; looking from the light across the empty street to the long-shuttered tenements and storefronts it seems possible to believe no one has ever lived here at all.

In May, people begin driving out onto the playground to shoot up. You can hear them puke for a while and
then the headlights of their cars case once more be-
tween the backstop and the low fence at the spot where
Baby Gangster was killed last year.

Sometimes I lie alone in the dark of my roof, watching.

But most nights I’m with the others, far outside the
city—playing, trying to get lost. We snort small white
diet pills or mescaline. There is always wine. The roads
outside the city are blacktop and cut across marsh and
into pine barrens and the towns up behind them along
the oceanfront. But then the towns end and there are
low hills, and fields where cows stand patiently among
the rocks, and the ocean can no longer be smelled at all.
In these places, villages once stood. Most are gone. Yet
just when it seems possible none might remain, there
will be a turn and past it an almost ruined church with a
grassy drive in which a number of cars sit, and the
church doors thrown open to the singing within; or,
some half dozen stores and a post office—around them,
several homes, and on the front porch of one, or in
the street under a single light, children, barefoot and
startled, look up from play. Staring quickly past the
church and from these children to the weathered and
sprawling homes, added piecemeal or left undone from
one generation to another, I think for a moment there
is something I recognize.
Where the hell is this, someone laughs.
What the hell is this?
And then the village is behind us, its few stores and homes, and we are back in unlighted countryside. Never actually lost, or not truly or for long. The roads here generally move with a certain determination toward one or another of the three major interstates and we almost always end within hours headed back again to the city.

Once, Tato followed a back route into another state altogether and then crossed from it to a dirt road which ran for some distance until it became little more than a washed-out path—rockstrewn, deeply rutted and with sudden turns—the largest trees receding from the path’s edge for tangled underbrush and stunt cut pine which slowly closed over the car, branches slapping its window: a closed-in tunnel, impossible to back out of and from which for quite some time there had been no turnaround.

“Like an ambush,” that’s what Clayton, a former soldier who’d already gone to the war and had been sent home with nerves, explained.

“Incoming,” he suddenly screamed.
Tato shut the car down.
“Shit man,” he said. “Jesus Christ, Clay.”
All that could be heard was the car ticking off heat,
and Clayton’s ragged breath. “I can’t see one goddamn thing,” he cried. “Not one.”

And it was true. Although we had come to a break in the tree line, an immense weight of darkness heaved and pushed itself from every direction. There were no stars. The sky didn’t even seem to start anywhere.

“Jungle dreams,” Clayton whispered. “We have,” he said, “stepped into some distance here.”

Clayton of course had been speaking of the past, of war, and killing perhaps—though looking at him, these did not seem things he should’ve known about, nor were they ones which fit the moment; but once he’d calmed down, we found ourselves on the edge of a meadow, and leaving the car, reconnoitering Clayton named it, there occurred to me a sense of stepping somehow past what might have been real and into Clayton’s dream of himself and the jungle—Tato, and me, and Rat, and Clayton as well, no more than shadows, and I felt that this dream could have been as actual a thing as any other and that we were in fact in a place that not one of us knew nor would be able to find our way back to again.

Later that night we went by the playground and stopped in its parking lot. The junkies were still there. They had pulled their cars into a circle edging the baseline, lights turned inward, and there was a commotion.
Three or four were attempting to put something, a body or someone passed out, into the car of another. But the car’s driver was angry. Finally, everyone gave up and dropped the unconscious person on the pitcher’s mound and left.

“What do you think we should do,” Tato asked.

No one said anything. After several minutes the car in which the others had been trying to put the body came back. Two people got out. They squatted over the man they’d left behind for a minute and then pulled his jacket off. Looking up at us one of them shrugged, “He’s my cousin.”

As they drove off this same man leaned out the window and told us—“I think he’s dead, anyway.”

A dragon (emerging)—delicate arms, childlike but a hand hooked into a claw pulling it from a banked storm of clouds.

The eyes—parrot bright in which two lines bisect: one red, one green.

Fire comes around the mouth.

The man who did it, a fat biker out of place in the well lit and neat shop on a Worcester side street, tried to push other, more ornate and expensive tattoos.

“Think carefully,” he’d said.
Sometimes there are memories of a child standing at the top of basement stairs. This is in Shelburne. I'm not sure how, but the child slips, cutting his head badly on the exposed edge of the second step, and tumbling forward, lands at the bottom of the stairwell, unable to breathe. His father is furious seeing tears. Or embarrassed. In other memories, the father has pushed the child.

"Oh my God," mother screams.

The dragon in the tattoo pulls itself into some fixed and unspoken absolute.

Whatever doesn't kill you, etc.

By nine-thirty I am up and dressed. Outside, puddles have guttered into dips where the sidewalks are buckled, and the water there is sheeted with oil and a chalky dust which seems to hang as well in the air—a taste, tongue, lips. Not rain, but the idea of rain.

Good morning, I say.

Up and down the street is nearly deserted except for several children who play before the rubble of a burned-out storefront.

Two boys and a much smaller girl.

The boys wear matching crewcuts shaved nearly bald and there is something compulsive, nearly sexual in the play of tendon and muscle about the base of their
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skulls; they clamber into and out of open window frames.

I imagine them to be family—the older of the boys in charge—and that their mother, most likely asleep on a daybed with some man, is glad to be rid of them for a while. Happy for the quiet. Because that's how it is—some man—because it is never given to be one, and constant, the men holding themselves apart from the children, and apart as well from the women, so that they, the women, are here, and the children, and by noon will be seen on the front stoops and sidewalks, talking among themselves, laughing, but not the men. Who are strangers sleeping in still darkened backrooms, who come out perhaps for a moment during the late day, moving past the women as if on important business. . . . And only at night, they stop—but to work on cars and get high, the cars and men soon gone.

As these two will leave their sister.

There will be a soft, down beard above their top lip, and on their chin, and they will be young men dull and angry—

Bang, the larger of them says coming up now behind the girl, but is ignored. "Bang," he repeats—she squatting above the pavement, unaware, secreting bits of rock and string in her mouth, and so the boy forms
with his thumb and forefinger a gun held to the base of her neck and tells her, "Hey," and this time she looks up, eyes flat yet surprised, about to cry. The skin of her arms and face is translucent, bonewhite, and run below with a maptrace of veins, and seeing by the dirt around her mouth what she's been doing, or perhaps only his interest turning elsewhere the boy grabs an arm and leads her, all three disappearing through the alley-mouth without a word.

At ten Margaret Gleevey pulls up in her battered gray Oldsmobile. The rest of the morning we drive from one neighborhood to another stopping at tenements where Margaret is owed rent money. I go in while she waits in the car. Margaret watches carefully. I am supposed to count the money out in front of her.

"How much there," she asks, "how much?"

Eventually she begins to tell me, as she does every week, about Ted Williams, the famous baseball player.

"He's been hiding next to my house," Margaret explains, "seeing me undress at night."

I glance over at her, from the corner of my eye: Margaret behind the wheel, bent misshapen. At a point just before the line of gray hair pulled back, there is a neat clear half-moon scar where a robber used a hammer and left her mostly dead in the hallway of one of her properties.
“Hey,” the robber had whispered, and when she turned he stepped to her from beneath the stairwell. It was after that she decided no longer to collect her own money. My deal is for free rent.


We go along like that. She explaining about Ted Williams and how there is something in his eyes and me wishing to be rid of her.

Just before a stop somewhere along Dexter Street the foresky goes dark, a flat slate green, and the air is pulled up into the sky; against it buildings stand out essential and drained of color, oddly weighted. Children hesitate in play before them, women at windows pull wash from lines. In lots the trash—a discarded couch, refrigerator, broken bits of glass, the frames of doors or windows—stands out as well, each singular against the absence, indrawn, waiting.

“Here it comes,” Margaret says, and then the first drops of rain, heavy and measured; the wipers go on and around us everything breaks open once more.

Baby Gangster died just after my parents moved to the coast—actually, my father had been gone six months before he called for us. Settling in. Getting things ready.
A new life, he wrote. A fresh start.

Yet I sensed, even behind those hopeful words, the slamming of cupboard doors, deep, intaken breaths, and the long, angry silences that had always been his language of disapproval. Everywhere about my mother and I, even then, although a thousand miles distant and its imperative therefore muted, still, rose and fell, rose and fell—"You will"—in everything he said, and me wanting no more. During the best of times Father was a difficult and angry man. But he drank. There was violence and that was a thing which had caused my running away, or, on several occasions, being sent to the homes of various relatives while "things cooled out," and one time involved even the state and me being a ward in the Children’s Center—and though there had been talk of a court trial that time, nothing came of it and after three months I was back home. My mother came to get me. I can remember several of the boys I knew watching us from a doorway as we walked out past the cluster of administration offices, and my mother, who was very pretty and who that day wore a pale blue dress and looked hopeful as a small child herself, glanced up and saw them, and smiled, and misunderstanding, called out telling them, "Say goodbye to your friend now. This is all over for him." But they only
stared at her for a moment longer and turned and went back into their cottage.

The sky that day had been the color of sand and low clouds obscured several buildings around the rail yards in the distance beyond the Children’s Center where the city began, and everything appeared stripped and cold. It was the beginning of winter. Within a week everything was to be covered in snow, but I couldn’t know that and as my mother and I made our way toward the parking lot I did not think of such things but instead listened as she explained how everything in life was no more than one moment passing by into another and that a person only had to outlive the bad in order to leave it behind. “Do you understand, honey?” she stopped and asked, a vague smile pulling at the corner of her mouth. And while I did not truly know, I believed she was only trying to explain that things were to be different. I told her so, and she laughed outright, and when we got to the car it in fact was not the same battered Renault always borrowed when my family needed to get somewhere and a cab or the bus would not do. Instead it was an Oldsmobile, somber and large and black, and though it was not a new car or even very well kept she’d had it washed and shined and the inside vacuumed so that it smelled as if it might be just off the
showroom floor, and she told me it was ours. "Your father," she said, "bought it last week."

I knew that it was supposed to soften me up.

After a minute—as if in afterthought, she added, "He's been in a program. For his drinking and such."

What else I remember was how our apartment—its mismatched furnishings: vinyl curtains, torn and taped over; battered chairs and stickleg tables; and on these mother's "treasures"... small cheap figurines bought off the counter at Woolworth's—how these had been arranged so as to appear almost cheerful when we got home.

"Welcome," Mother cried out, flinging the door wide for me.

And how all of it, the car, someone's fifty-dollar cast-off for sure, and the sad attempt to make our apartment other than it really was, at once brought in me a sense of pity, and shame, and hatred; because it could be no more than a joke, and nothing had really changed, so that when my father began drinking again—which he did soon enough—there was to be more trouble, eventually including, several years later, a gun and another man from the neighborhood. By then I felt, though only fourteen, almost grown myself and when I came home one night and found him on the couch with a pistol as if he'd had the thought of using it
on himself, I realized that while there was little I could ever say in order to make any person’s life better I wasn’t interested in his anyway.

“I don’t know what might happen from this,” my father told me. But soon after he moved to a small city south of San Francisco, and although it is not a place I know or have ever seen, I picture it to be set against cliffs so steep that below them the ocean might appear helpless and without effect.

“I don’t know,” he said and then they were both gone, she, as I mentioned, just before Baby Gangster got shot.

And that, which neither felt nor seemed like dying because though blood was everywhere and pooled about my feet as I knelt and beneath his head and on his shirt, and I could see— but all of it calm—the shots and Baby Gangster, falling, trying to speak. Everyone else had run so I leaned over to him. “Dude?” I said.

I wanted to reach into his wallet to strip him of something.

“You’re not losing anything,” I told him, unable to become angry at either of us, or at the shooters who’d driven off leaving Baby Gangster to die.

“This is too easy,” I said. And I thought then of my mother and how when I’d confronted her and told her that I would not go to the coast—that I would cut my
father’s throat, and hers too if need be—all of it had carried beyond what could find return.

“Fuck you,” I’d said, and that had been a death.

But this . . . I leaned toward Baby Gangster, embarrassed that I should be alone with him. And although he tried to speak and my lips formed, I believe, his words as he said them, I could not understand.

It was just dark—low, thin clouds massed like formless gray sheets bleached white were set against the sky, and lights went on up and down the Avenue. I looked at Baby Gangster. He appeared ridiculous, so young—just a boy, shot as if he were a man.

“Pray,” I told him, unable to think of anything else.

It is at a party that I see Comerford, trying to keep himself to the fringes as usual, and he is surprised when I talk to him and then offer my apartment as a place to stay until things can come together. While I make this offer I’m thinking of times when people have allowed me to sleep on a couch or extra bed for a week or two, and I’m imagining as well Comerford walking across the playground alone, past the basketball courts and down into the woods, picking—how?—the exact spot he’ll dig for himself a place to sleep and live.
"Don’t worry, man," I tell him when I notice the uncertainty in Comerford’s face, “it’s no problem.”

Yet when he shows up the next night I don’t recognize him at all for a moment. I have been smoking PCP with several girls from the neighborhood. One of these girls is short and has large breasts and has just been released from a hospital or escaped and does not want to return. She still wears a hospital identification bracelet and a paper gown which keeps falling open at its back.

“Oh shit,” she has been saying to a second, taller, girl all night long. This taller girl is dressed completely in black and has painted her fingernails purple. One time I find myself in the kitchen, unsure why, and the tall girl comes in and we kiss, but when Comerford knocks everyone is once again in the living room watching a movie about a man marooned in outerspace.

I walk to the door and stare out at Comerford, his hair is luminous and damp. Behind him, in the street, is a pale blue Chrysler Imperial, its engine running. “Oh,” I say after a minute and let him in.

Past the final rowhouse: several cut stone buildings and the two stripmalls which form an arc of light at the point
where they meet, and from one store Margaret emerges and shuffles down an alley and out through the parking lot of a Cambodian bar lit up as if this were another country and then along a deserted street past the old stockyards. The night hot, a pale thin strip of moon hung against the thick sky, that and an occasional street-light and the distant sound of traffic, and Margaret makes her way finally through all of this to an unused railway tunnel where legless veterans and insane people no longer wanting shelters have built a city of cardboard and tin.

Just inside the tunnel she disappears.

"Margaret," I would like to call out. But she would never answer now.

There are fires in barrels back around the tunnel wall, and the rest is darkness and voices which whisper and nothing else until a face, white and ghastly, leans up from the dark as if from nowhere and snaps its teeth and is gone.

I look up. Beside a wall on a shoulder of blacktop grown through with beachgrass and dry white flowers, Tato's car is parked—doors thrown open—music from a tape halted at a point in the air distinctly before us, then
continuing, severed, apparently without form, and I think of children's gibberish, songs of one refrain sung over and again.

"What do you guess?" Cathead asks nodding at me and then pointing with his emptied can of beer.

Cathead believes the tornado will come, but the others remain less sure. All of it is of small interest. For a long moment I wonder what my mother, who in all her years of being in our city never once left the borders of her own neighborhood, would see here this morning. The same road and field and walls of course; the ocean she so well loved to collect in picture postcards. In our apartment, after he was gone, my mother turned what had been an extra, workroom, into "hers." There were knickknacks which had been stored in the cellar, lamps and spreads—the postcards. She had most on one large table in the center of the room. The shades were always drawn. It was cool and you could not hear the city outside.

"Where are we?" she would ask, smiling.

Her gesture encompassing in motion the tiny cut figures of rocks and trees, of animals and shepherds.

"Where?"

It was in this room I found her the week before we had planned to leave for California, coming to her,
knowing I would not go, and I told her—what? The table was bumped. A figurine fell, and she drew back, stricken—perhaps in fear.

I felt myself grow around this woman.

"Stupid," I told her. "Stupid, stupid, stupid." And thought then I saw her clearly—the drawn-in white skin at her face and throat, the fragile play of tendon, a smell which was powder and heat. There was a moment, then my hands swept the rest of the figurines onto the floor.

"And if I did go," I said thinking of my father. "I'd cut him. Kill his ass. Do you hear me?"

In the end what could she do?

I was left in the "care" of an aunt I've not seen since.

This morning we have come here to get drunk and wait until the storm predicted last night touches down so that we can bodysurf the rocks at Beavertail. "Check it out," Cathead had told us, "the whole fucking situation will be out of control." And that had been the idea. Something out of control. A bit of danger.

Songs played out in our head.

Yet if I could stand outside I would see the three of them sitting on rocks in front of a cemetery for a community which no longer exists, and me just in back, and I would wonder about us not at all.

I spend less and less time with my friends. At night
I avoid the places they meet. But I don’t stay home where it has become impossible because of Comerford who stopped leaving first the apartment, and then his room, and finally his bed altogether.

In his room the shades are pulled close and there is a smell like moisture, cut open.

What are you doing anyway, I’d confront him when it started. I would move toward a window and then stop and face him, but he’d only shrug and ask me to turn on the televisions, there are two—one without picture and the other sound—at the foot of his bed.

What are you doing, I wanted to know, frightened for some reason, passing a hand through air gone heavy with the presence of him.

Very late some nights a dull blue flutter changes the shadows in his room and I hear a soft murmur of voices.

I dream.

And then get up and walk through the city. It is like this: the bars and strip joints shuttered down, doorways and windows empty, one or two men gathered around a couch in a vacant lot.

Sometimes, there is more.

Once I came right into a shooting.

It was very nearly morning. The man who had been shot sat slumped into the seat of a car. Although part of his head appeared to have been broken like strings of
glass you could see that he was alive . . . still breathing, and each time he did a rattle of breath escaped his throat. I watched him like that for a minute knowing it would not go on for long. On the sidewalk in front of the shooting a beautiful Puerto Rican woman stood crying and pressing her hands together as if they were small animals which might escape. Several teenagers in gang colors talked softly to her.

It was a sound like pigeons cooing.

I wondered to myself who these people were. It seemed as if they might be my very own family and I wished to be included in their warm circle of grief, but they had not yet noticed me nor would they likely say a word when they did.

"Oh God. Oh, my dear God," the woman began to cry out. "Oh no. Please, please."

What power she had in that moment! It was as if the entire city had closed around her, and I, partially hidden, was unable to enter but only looking as she was urged toward the top step of a basement stair by the others. I could see: the car, a line of fire escapes, one or two lights which were on in windows, and it occurred to me then that there were no sirens, that no one else was coming out to look—I was alone with the four, and that not one of them would step forward because they thought it possible that whoever shot their friend might
return; and without decision or knowing why, but perhaps understanding only that I could, I walked to the car and quickly reached inside its window, unsure even of what I was looking for, the thing I needed to take from the dying man, until I found it.

When I turned again, one of the pendejos, taller and more thickset than the others, was beginning across the walk for me. Behind him the beautiful woman had fallen silent.

"Motherfucker," the gangbanger called out as he worked a short length of pipe from inside his shirt.

Because it had started then I smiled and leaned back into the window and kissed his dying friend’s face and came up with my mouth bloody and then showed to all of them what I’d already taken from the car. It was a wallet. I held it up in my hands and shook what little money was inside out onto the sidewalk.

"My friends," I said.

The one who had charged stopped short at the sight of my bloodied mouth and began watching as I carefully put the wallet in a back pocket. He fingered a cross at his neck and looked over to the others. No one moved. When I could see that nothing more might happen I stepped away from the car—hands out in a gesture of questioning—and slowly backed into the street and turned and hurried from them.
“Cabron,” the thickset one called after me, “usted arbrera en el infeirno.”

The wallet is safekept under several shirts in the closet of my apartment. Inside are letters and cards and notes, and a picture as well, but not of the beautiful woman who cried on the sidewalk—although I’ve made up in my mind several stories about her and the dying man. Often, I see them together under trees in a park. They speak softly. This is the map I carry with me.

I would like to tell Cathead now that it is hurricanes—that a tornado, specific and of a particular path, has little to do with working the sea into any fury, and that none are likely to put down right along the coast to begin with.

I would like to tell him that, but it is useless, so I look where he gestures—to the Point upon which the compound with a rich family’s four houses sits, and the sky there gone to a purple welt bruised yellow along its edge, and I tell him I guess so.

That it very well might be.

One leg raw against the sheet and mattress edge, and an arm thrown forward create a line from bed to window.

In the mirror I see him. His mouth as near, or
memory—a voice which enters my throat—I feed him bits of bread.

For one moment smell what he must smell. (In this room, burning sap and overripened fruit.)

It is the same earth—houses, sidewalks, a smell of moisture, cut open. The same city.

In mid-August I decide to leave. To get away from the neighborhood. Disappear.

My way of going is through a job of night fireman at a children’s psychiatric hospital which gives room and board. The hospital itself is a three-story red brick building. Its driveway curves through a stand of elms whose leaves are purple and throw shade on either side of a series of well-kept lawns.

“No one else knows,” I tell Margaret as if there might be some bond between us other than indifference.

Outside her window women come to the head of an alley. They raise their hands to their lips and call children home.

“Shadows. Life. God’s mouth,” she directs these women.

I ignore her and point out that I will be at least twenty minutes from downtown. And then, although I
don't believe it myself, I tell her Comerford will take over the rent collections.

"He wants the same deal," I say, "as if it were still me."

In the hospital I lie on a bed in a large square room, along a corridor filled with the offices of doctors and social workers. I memorize escape routes. They have been posted on a mirror above my sink.

Stay calm, is rule number one.

Make sure the children remain together during evacuation.

There are blue arrows and lines along which I can follow a path to safety. The children, most of whom have gone so violent toward their own selves that they must wear an elaborate getup of headgear and thumbless gloves twenty-four hours a day, would not be interested in these charts.

At night I dream of fires.

The security guard, night nurse, and myself stand on a front lawn. We have saved ourselves only. I can hear the children. They burn like empty walls.

I get up and piss down the sink drain.

Although it is nearly five in the afternoon, there are people in conference just outside my door. I stand qui-
etly for a minute and then wet a cloth to put over my face against the heat and sun.

When I wake again the doctors and social workers have gone for the day.

I walk to the bathroom where there is a shower.

Back in my room I smoke cigarette after cigarette.

On Wednesdays, which is my only night off, I walk to a stripmall where I can eat pizza and drink beer with people I have never seen before. I sit with them, smiling—at strangers, at waitresses—and think about everyone back in the city who must wonder how or why I have vanished. Rat. Tato. The rest of them.

There is also a movie theater in the mall and I sometimes go to it.

Always, I’m back in my room by midnight.

“Checking in,” I tell the security guard who mostly uses a tiny office just inside the hallway where there is a television and where he can safely eat Percodans, but sometimes I must go looking for him. Once he was out by his car in the parking lot.

“Look,” he said.

The sky had been filled by lights falling across it.

“Happens every eighty years or so. Something to do with a comet.” He handed me a joint half smoked down
and we finished it and stood staring at the sky but I could tell they were not shooting stars at all, only jets and attack helicopters from the army base.

“Can you believe it?” he asked me.

Later that same night I woke to a terrible sound. I thought it was an alarm and could barely breathe. But it turned out to be the security guard calling to say that someone wanted to speak with me. The hospital has an old-fashioned A-board phone system. I waited. There was an audible hiss and crackling sound and then Margaret came on the line. She was speaking under her breath.

“He’s right outside,” she said.

“Who?” I asked although I already understood her to mean Ted Williams.

“He followed me again.”

“You sound far away,” I said. “Why’d you call?”

I raised up to stub a cigarette out in an ashtray I keep on the sill of my window. The lights had stopped in the sky, and beyond a knot of black I knew to be woods falling off to marsh and silt land were now visible the first faint signs of the interstate and the refineries which rise above the bay at the city’s edge.

“I know where you go,” I spoke into the phone, thinking of the deserted railway tunnel, of Margaret
offering her withered tit to be palmed by filthy hands, in dreams of what?

"I saw—" Whispered, suddenly angry, wanting her to be afraid, but unsure of what had been actual and what not.

"Oh boy," she laughed back. "Yes yes yes—" then, "Wait."

The phone was dropped and I could hear her in the background—small, rustling noises. It went on for several minutes.

"Did you forget me?" I shouted.

But she'd come back on again. "It's all right," Margaret breathed.

"He's gone... Okay. Listen. Do you remember your friend, Comerford?"

I said nothing.

"The rents I collect myself. He's been all the time right there in that room. There was a smell. The neighbors thought: he's dead.

"But he was just there in that room.

"The electricity was turned off, only he found a way to get it back. I had the water shut down. I saw him. I went to a window. 'Come out,' I told him. 'Please; can you hear me?'

"I told him, I said: 'now you must leave,' but he's
right there still today. I have to get a priest, or someone. . . . And you—I need you to help.”

I begin to break into people’s houses. Not to steal anything. Just to walk through where they belong. The first are in the Highlands, set off like tiny jeweled parks. It is a place of little worry. The sound of traffic from the boulevard one street below is no more than a whisper.

Then in neighborhoods closer by the hospital.

I believe that there is no place that does not see you.

Once, an old woman stepped right from the center of a miraculous light—she was only getting off a bus but it seemed like a miracle at the time, and I decided to follow her. She went into a section of streets filled with brown and cream duplexes.

She walked with small tidy steps as if each one were an allotment and did not look up or to the side even when I passed her several times close by, doubling back, trying to make her see me. I imagine that was a thing she’d learned, not seeing, but if a person were bent on some harm what good would it do her?

None at all, I can tell you that.

When the old woman started up to one of the duplexes no different than any of the others, I stepped back into the shadow of a building across the street.
After a minute a light went on in her kitchen and I was surprised to see a man sat there. He'd been waiting in the dark. The man was bent forward, his chest against a peeling metal table, and there was a growth on his neck. It looked like four short fingers twined together. It was white and bobbed up and down each time the man moved his head. Which he did constantly. Like one of those plastic dogs in a car's back window. Something was very wrong with this man but I couldn't tell you what. Only another person like himself waiting in the dark would be able to understand such a problem. The woman fed him and then they sat together at the table not seeming to speak. Finally the man got up and shuffled over to the window. For a moment I believed he was looking out at me, and, startled, I moved back against the building, but he was only standing there thinking about whatever it was that was killing him.

What can a man like that tell himself each morning when he wakes up!

I began imagining myself in their home at a time when they were out, touching his hairbrush and comb, the brittle paper feel of her underthings. I was overcome by a sense of the quiet, the private quality of silence they must have owned and I wanted to end all of that.

The next week I go back to the apartment, early,
carrying groceries in brown bags which I fold and stack neatly inside on a counter once I've popped the front door. All that's needed is a drivers' license. The rooms of the apartment are close. Dark and without air. They are weighted with objects. Cheap prints and cutouts from magazines have been framed and hung on the walls which are white up high and stained and darkened along their base. I find half-filled glasses of water everywhere. China dogs, and dolls made of straw and bedecked with bright colored ribbons and pieces of cloth. In one drawer, photographs of a beautiful girl, many of them black and white, curling along an edge, placed carefully between cloth and showing over and again the same or similar scene. Rolls of dimes and quarters set on flowered porcelain butter dishes.

Out of time. That's how it feels, and me as well... removed, passing, gone.

Just before five I draw a hot bath and climb in with a bottle of wine and four Valium blue tens.

I lay out candles in each room. Put pictures from the wallet of the man shot sitting in his car around on mantles and a television and dresser top. At some point after deciding to get some food I find myself in one of the back rooms on a bed, an inception of the girl from the photographs... imagined, watching for signs.

This is you—I whisper.
And, Us together—at the very moment I accept the old woman’s small, neat, footfall to which I’ve given birth begin up the back entrance. But I remain frozen until there could be the sound of a key in its lock, and then, very aware and with a careful motion, take a heavy glass bookend and step quickly with it behind a curtain.

How often have I believed before or since that a particular time and place of some understanding had come, that I am into something so real that it cannot be taken back? I can remember waiting for the woman for her.

How if I leaned forward, through a crack between the curtain and a wall abutment, I would see my own reflection in a dresser mirror. The thinnest line of body from waist to chest; the doorstop held slightly to the side before a shoulder—face halved and my right eye peering fully from the curtain’s edge.

Can you believe me when I say that this was both me and not?

And that when I close my eyes now, here, what I find at night is no more than this: Comerford, his fingers working into the earth’s fleshy knots, digging, with small animal patience.