

Seeking Air

It ought to be an exact chronicle of twelve years from the time of spilling the coffee to drinking of coffee. From Dunstable to Dublin with every single passage since . . . two hundred chapters of madness, the chapter of long walks, the Berkshire surprise, fifty chapters of little times.

Dean Swift to Vanessa

Begin with telling her everything, she had said.

This provoked me into wanting to say less and less.

Yet there was such a marvelous, such an extraordinary circumference around what I might or might not tell. I thought about it. I never thought about it less than an ordinary day. I considered it into the reaches of the night. Even past novel reading or picture seeing. I wondered what it was that I might say to her. These are all parentheses, thoughts also, they go, as one would say, along the routes. They march down the avenues.

There is no point in telling you about the Ecuador or Chinese shops. You have heard about them. You have even visited the squares and sat in front of the flags. You have even entered the buildings. I think you have been just in your remarks. Not always swimming on a bland bright day with the sun at your heels, not always acquiescing to the psalm singing drift of the white lilted bright Asiatic day at your roots. Do you think so?

And now that we are quite away from everyday, now that we have forgotten perhaps to say now and wander correctly groomed, I wonder. Are you like a movie? It began this way.

I am Laffide.

She is Laffida.

We have no nationalities, no borders. We have no wars. We are a couple. One of us likes to travel. One of us fears movement and prefers to stay at home. One of us likes men. One of us likes women; we are objectives. In some way we must make a living. This can be done by changing the verb or noun object. One can also change a record, or perhaps give up a car forgetting the numerals.

I think of myself in a certain age group. And I have been reminiscing. I have been putting myself in the place of – well whoever it is – someone not here. I have been dreaming of a sentimental bookshelf But you have never read the book that begins with Dark and never in your dearest moments thought

you could capture the sequence of that Dark which is what someone once asked of me. Could this be done? Of course I said no. We are living in another generation. We are living.

Do you think it will be as if we were unable to find the boat going from shore to shore? I do. I do, indeed. You are the unrecognizable shore and that with the drift of weed about it. It only takes a tunny ship. The big birds go there and we are afraid of them. Someone has defined ship as shore. A quick, lunatic man. I think the gulls know best, One can even describe persons. Why do they draw in sand?

Why have I sat in a square room in a city describing a plan. Which rooms did I get wrong? How do you spell tobaggan? And words like operetta. Someone said if you think like La Belle Helène, but I don't. Then it would be another problem. Twinkletoes. I don't believe you think of Fred Astaire, because you never told me so. It well may be. It well may be like the slow lights of a town. The train is going to the city. The workers will go tomorrow to the city. Yet now they are enclosed in their houses. Even they have little stories told about them.

They have visitors to their town. Criminally assaulting the city with their plans, and their hopes. Yet always withholding like underbrush the rabbit. I don't know. I keep saying I don't know. That is because I am awaiting your answer. Your answer will tell me what I am awaiting. You who are such a foreign person. I don't mean foreign to our shores, yet never have you experienced the dubious joys of sailing forth into this wilderness. Or I don't think you have. Perhaps you have? Perhaps you are a refugee? Perhaps your name is in reality such a foreign cognomen you will explain all this to me.

With you I may place a foot upon the lost way.

I began to know you somewhat when you introduced me to your friends. That is, I began to see you outside myself. I was permitted to witness those aspects of your person which were not private. The public view, as a painting seen at an exhibition, is so important. You know how often I have repeated that a painting varies in values when seen in the studio, at a gallery, or in a museum. How often I have been enchanted with the work of a painter when it was showed at the studio, brushes in hand, the cup of cold coffee on the table and here and there the evidence of a struggle in the crumpled sketch paper or the postcard tacked on the wall or the notebook open to the three scrawled lines, written no doubt in the early morning. And the variation at the exhibition of this same painting, its statement lost among the personalities.

And didn't we enjoy that museum in Siena? Despite your cold and runny nose, the missing tissue. Especially keen to us was the landscape outside the window corresponding so exactly to the painting on the wall. We were quite unable to "judge" the value of the paintings themselves. They might have been rather ordinary, as indeed, I remember many of them to have been. Here for an agreeable time was no element of art "triumphing" or "improving" nature. Nature and art were in such similitude due to the exact degree of their presentation; due that is to the light reaching into the room, to the color of the ground and to the distance of the hills, each of which appeared in the painting.

And so it was with you, Miriam, when you said in that voice which is so like the color of your hair: "This is Robert. This is Celestine."

Robert I did not like immediately. I resented his having known of your existence longer than I. Then he is handsome and I am not. An old-fashioned attitude of mine. It seems no longer one makes the choice of deciding if a person is handsome. Like so many disappearing conveniences which have been replaced by other conveniences, the aesthetic of the human face has been withdrawn. Now one says, "He has an interesting face" or more likely, "He looks like his sister," or again, "How virile," or again, "I like a nose slightly out of joint." Note that one never mentions, as ethics also are changing, "a corrupt mouth."

Do you suppose people still say, "He wears his heart on his sleeve"? I know very well that a few romantic exchanges still persist. Just the other day someone said to me, "How Doris has changed. Her eyes are so dark and sunken. She has cried too much." And it was true. The life of Doris was beginning to disintegrate, or rather she was in the middle of that era in her life when a decision needed to be made which she sought to postpone through constant tears, tears that successfully hid what she could not bear to see. I know also that Annette was chastised because her face was becoming too "full."

Actually the plumpness of her cheek line gave it a mature beauty. But it was not the aesthetics of her face which were questioned. No one, I reiterate, cares much about the proportions of beauty. What exactly was meant was the moral comment that Annette had been drinking too much and this incontinence was betrayed by her face. Nearly always our comments are relative to the presence of the superlative. One can permit the comparative, indeed that is what success is based on, but the superlative is disastrous.

There is something a little superlative about Celestine. Can I guess it is because she loves Robert too much? I noticed she was unable to concentrate on our conversation. I wasn't altogether flattered that it seemed a matter of indifference to her whether or not she was introduced to me. Celestine likes you.

But I don't think she approves of you. She is given (part of her superlativeness) to conclusions. From a few "chance" remarks, such as, "Miriam you should go out more," I gather she has concluded you live too much the life of a spinster. How ridiculous this is we both know. Celestine really does admire an intense love. you can tell this by the way she dresses. There are so many open spaces in her clothing and then they are flattened out. In order to vary her ensembles she adds a bit too much. It is like her apartment where we went afterwards. I like it when she uses primary colors, but she does not understand dark corners. There is too much eloquence in her window dressing. You see how given one is to criticism of a superlative sort of person? I hope I didn't show my distaste for the way she made our supper.

It wasn't the food, it was the preparation. Those "let's have" and "put in another can" and "one should always use" I objected to. Robert was pleased with the meal and she appeared to enjoy our conversation which might have been about the sunrise for all I know. It was only when he began to tell us of his trip to Asia that I woke up. I was reminded of a trip I had made on the Nile which reminded me of my mother's earrings which reminded me of the garbage which used to collect under her window in our summer house which reminded me of my sister Jennifer's bicycle I used to borrow on a glowing morning which reminded me of you who have always reminded me of Jennifer.

And so I began to relax in the company of your friends, because they were part of you. I knew that after a few hours I should see you alone and then I would see you differently, then you would be part of me, but I did want to postpone your separation from your friends so that I might study you more octagonally; you were still only rectangular to me and I wished to seize the opportunities of our supper party. Now you are more like a pebble. Your sides do not match; you are neither round nor square, yet you are beginning to have a promising shape.

I almost came upon it in the dark. When we were alone at my apartment. You were lying on the sofa and your head fell slightly to the left. Your skin was a dark green. Your eyelids were that natural grey and your hands slightly yellowed, a spot of moisture above your lip. You were speaking of revolutions and the shortening of the span between medieval and modern. Your laughter occasionally broke into black lines, the spaces contravening between thought and speech. Your long upper thigh was stretched tensely toward an object I could not see, but which I understood to be just out of my reach. It was the posture of the lion in the cage whose paw gropes outside the bars for a lump of raw meat. I snapped open the lock and opened the cage. I hoped to discover under that mild manner of yours the ferocity which I had noticed when you bit into a piece of cake that evening in St. Augustine.

Miriam. You have been given the perfect name. There are two vowels and three consonants.

The next morning after you had left I was neatening your traces. You do leave behind you an extraordinary disorder. That was what I thought when first I knew you. Now I recognize your assortments. There is a lucidity in your placing of personal objects. On one table the hairpins. On another the powder. Here is a half-eaten pear. In the bathroom the soap has slipped to the floor. A lipstick lies on an ashtray in the middle of the bed. And yet there is "order, clarity, lucidity." And there is a purity in your design, like a Matisse painting of "Studio." It took me a long time to learn this.

At first I was scandalized, as was my mother with my adolescent room. I can see her stooping over a garment, questioning me why I live so differently from her and father. Following her eye to the lawn I would think of the linen closet with those elegant shapes of towels and sheets and wonder, indeed, why my own closet, my bed which I thought of as my splendid tent, should be so messy. Later when I owned my own apartment I became obsessively neat. I missed my mother.

I wanted to tell you about my return to my parents' house. It was last summer when you had gone off on what you call your "assignments." I know they are not assignations, but this business life of yours is so disparate to me; your life in what is known as "outside our world" is so cloudy to me that I cannot fictionalize Miriam meeting a strange person, Miriam asking this person an intimate question, Miriam writing down what is said. in her notebook. You have showed me this notebook. To me it is only filled with diagrams of train schedules which explain to me where you will be in one hour when I shall need you.

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Last summer I went to the country to look at our old house. My parents had always been so unfortunate in business dealings that it had become impossible for them to find a tenant for the house. Going over my objections they still could not find someone to buy the house.

I seldom visit this house, but it was a dry summer, a hot summer. I knew that the house by the sea with its furniture shrouded in sheets would be cool, even chilly. When I opened its windows the sea air would blow through it, pushing out the smell of mothballs and old mattresses. The tap water after the first rush of rusty water would be clear, cold, cold. I could walk to the ocean and bathe each day, returning to that old outside shower under which I used to stand letting the sand and salt water wash off me, the shower water running into the slightly browned grass around the drain. I used to think of myself as a gazelle at a watering spot! Later, many brave animals who had come to the water hole briefly to drink.

In those days I was always changing myself into an animal. When I was a unicorn it was in the parlor near the watercolor picture of *Mélisande*. I remember that she was looking sadly into a pool where her gold ring had been dropped. I was angry with her because she had betrayed me with King *Péleas*. I had confused my centuries; any lady in court dress would hold the head of a unicorn in her lap. For *Mélisande* the unicorn could only be a myth about which she had read, who had once appeared in another country. You know that I remedied that error in my book which is now translated into several languages.

There is a dog who lives near our property. There is always a dog, but this spaniel I could see watching me from across the lawn. As I went from room to room opening the windows I would see him racing back and forth in front of his house. At night when I would climb the stairs, crossing the landing, going from room to room turning on the lights, I would hear him howl. Finally the watchful presence of this animal to whom I had made no overtures, but who so concerned himself with the movements of my life, began to disturb me. I decided that inasmuch as he was the only species of life in that community who was aware of my identity, that is, the peculiarities of my personal habits, I might very well make overtures toward him. Keep in mind I had been staying in the house, talking to no one, going each day to the sea for a swim, and returning to a shrouded house to cook my meal, to reminisce, and go to bed. I was aware that after I had retired he would come to my house, poke into the garbage, roam about the grounds, and sniff at the porch. Yet never in the daytime.

One morning after my swim, when I was showering and recalling my lost animal identities, I saw him sitting halfway up on the lawn. I whistled. How long it had been since I had whistled! It was such a dusty noise, yet he heard it. There he was bounding toward me. To shorten this, Miriam, we became friends. Whereas formerly my tracks had been from the sea to the house, now he began to accompany me about the grounds. He knew those old paths better than I. He took me to the barn, then to the carriage house. It was there I made my discovery, the consequence of which has set me on an entirely new train of metaphysical enquiry. The results of which can

only be antithetical to those of my colleagues. Yet what are colleagues? Enemies!

The grass was rougher, tougher in certain clods. These clods stood out against the clean, thin, fresh slips of grass. They were coarse-grained and the clods were in the shape of a horse's hoof. These were the same tracks that had been made by my grandfather's carriage horses. They were the tracks the horses had made when we children rode over the lawn to the fury of our elders. What a cautious hoarder is nature; how sly and penurious, how reproductive, how unforgetful. She likes to hear the same old opera over and over. Nothing new about her. Reflect that I was led to these conclusions, only a fraction of which I have stated here, by a dog.

I shall not bore you any longer with these reminders. Long Island is not Balbec, any more than Balbec is Combray. Any more than I would use a bathing machine.

Dinner at my apartment. An evening with a New Zealander.

I received a telephone call from young Tom Powell saying he was passing through this city. He was bringing a herd of cattle to New Zealand from Ireland! Tom is the brother of Sheila, a delightful girl who was the governess of the children of friends with whom I had stayed in London. "Gouvernante" was really the term the hotel people liked to bestow upon her, the hotel where she and the child would have dinner. Actually she came from that indispensable British agency, Universal Aunts. Sheila had accompanied a family of Americans when they travelled to France, Italy and Greece. The good humor and manners of this girl (23) were compelling. If she indulged herself in moods this indulgence certainly took place privately. She was fond of her young wards. she was pleased with the countries she visited. (Liking Italy less, a bit overwhelmed by France, an admirer of Greek ruins.) Her geographical and presumably cultural education completed she wished to return to New Zealand. We had been surprised at her decision, thinking she might marry a Welshman, a farmer, who had grown up near the border, quite near the spot her family had emigrated from. However, such is the pull of her island that Sheila desired to return to it.

I have photographs of her wedding which took place at Waipawa. There stands the wedding party in front of the white wooden church. They are properly arrayed in taffetas and borrowed formal dress. On the wedding group shines that white clean New Zealand light, the envier of shadows. It is an English wedding. An Episcopal style church. Bless Sheila, she will have children named Diana, Rosemary and Guy.

Arrival of Miriam. Her first New Zealander. She helps with the table. She is in a friendly humor. Arrival of Tom.

He is tall, well formed, blond and healthy-cheeked. His hair is cut in a bang across his forehead. This once might have signalled the country bumpkin, now it is a modulated version of the current long hair. Fresh from a British barber. Its original cut modified somewhat by his recent stay in Ireland. A ruffling of the locks into authenticity.

Tom delights us. He is simple, direct (as was Sheila), he appears to have none of the traces of inferiority toward more cosmopolitan places as would his contemporary from this country. We were both rather overcome by this person. Later in the evening a wee bit bored.

His most important remark, or so I thought, aside from his description of loading the cattle onto an airplane in Ireland, was made when he told us of visiting Westminster Abbey on Commonwealth Day. The remark was: "You know we used to sing those old Episcopal hymns in our little church. I never quite understood what they meant, although I would sing along. Then we sang the hymns, the same ones in the Abbey. A great throng there was and a large choir. Suddenly I understood about England's fair and green land. I knew about the Lord being a Shepherd, because I had tended sheep, but I hadn't before realized the sheep in the hymns were thousands of people, not just woolly bleating animals."

I think Miriam liked best his telling us of visiting the minister in Shropshire. Miriam was teary-eyed when Tom told us the minister was the last of his branch of the Powells, and further was preaching the last Powellized sermon. Would Tom return to hear another sermon so that another Powell would sit in the congregation? That he wouldn't.

I forgot to say Tom brought flowers. Red and white carnations for Christmas.

A well-articulated man who carried himself well. Large flushed hands.

6

At the movies with Miriam. Another Italian import. I fell to thinking about a review I had read of a book called *The Case for Spelling Reform*. The question was: is there a case for spelling reform? Henry Sweet, “the greatest of all English philologists,” thought so. The book was written by Mont Follick. This kept me occupied through three quarters of the film. I then cast a few shadows toward the Shavian alphabet. I finished the last episode of the movie with a Shavian denouement in mind. Follick believed that the adjective “subtile” was derived from “the days when the Roman philosophers used to wander up and down under the lime trees trying to emulate each other with clever arguments and phrases, often splitting hairs over very fine differences, so *subtilis* was born – lime tree being *tilia* in Latin.”

7

Things have fallen out and things have fallen in.

HG WELLS

Miriam, we are going to Minna's. Ah, this is when you put your hand in mine. We are going to pass through the corridors of my past. Then stairs. First up to the rooms. We push the bell. Someone nearby says, "They wouldn't let me into the bar of the Seven Seas." We are in a hallway. Miriam. I touch you. You who have never known the years of these rooms. I feel your heavy dress. We go up the stairs. There it is.

This is the water's music. I am walking by the water. I am telling you, my sister, you are syllables. You are the music dropped on leaves. I am saying there is the funeral of Lenin. If you wish to listen. I am saying we are living at the top of the house and there the chords make such a sound the steeple sweeps sideways against the sky. And then we begin.

8

It is six a.m. in Los Angeles. The hour of first light. A beginning of a day which has no changes, remaining all seasons, a boy with his wheel.

Ah, Miriam, we are lying together on such a low bed. Not at all like our old bed. It is really a pallet. The light from the ceiling hurts my eyelids and I think of morning's cool haze. So dark at first then a faint light, then the roses strewn; yet hesitant, somehow careful, as if the roses were floating into day which carried a handful of cards, a bright deck hidden in the palm.

Searching you. The light on your face. The yellow.

Miriam, where are we?

Your skin. Dowsed with light.

Except that, Miriam, we are in New York and you have promised that there will be no deaths. Before I tell you a few extraordinary tales.

It is night. I have told you about the jewel robbery, about the man "who didn't care", and about the bedrooms filled with watches. You have told me how you froze in your black winter coat (like Roman cherries that coat). Even if the fur did rough up the edges and make you fear that "snow will never settle here."

Morgan!

I am listening. My real dreams hurt you. Stabs of joy.

It's laudanum time.

A wisp of green sunset falls across the chaise.

The papa of Elizabeth is pacing his study floor.

The dog thumps his tail.

The book of poems quietly turns its leaves.

Robert rounds the corner, his boots chumping in the watery snow.

The heavy eyelids of Elizabeth stoop lower into the smile at the mouth's bend which is slightly plumper with patience.

The Jamaica bananas with their soft round toes.

I like astrakhan sunsets on the rug. And "gaudy melon flowers." And the firm bite of exile.

Robert has arrived. He has brought a present. It is called *The Care of Books in a Tropical Climate*.

It is the last Christmas on Wimpole Street. They are going to the land of Ruddigore.

Miriam exits with a flick of the fingernail. Ta.

I have changed to the new typewriter with the large type. Sadly, tenderly I put the old one in the closet. And I confess only to you, Miriam, how near I was to tears. The letters I have written to you on the old typewriter. The hours I have spent in front of it seeking your image, or trying to reclaim your image from the alphabet that settled over your face. The sentence that would describe with its careful punctuation (and its momentous pauses while I lit a cigarette) my exact feeling for you and the tonal area of our solutions.

Now space enlarges in front of me. The proportions are attenuated. There is more prose on the roller. I must maintain my former techniques at the same time as I move stealthily into the new structure whose windows are still dark.

I am only beginning to “touch” it. And I have been seven years “touching” your face.