

JOHN
UPDIKE



THE
POORHOUSE
FAIR

A NOVEL

John Updike

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by John Updike

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*If they do this when the wood is green,
what will happen when the wood is dry?*

LUKE 23:31
E. V. Rieu translation

INTRODUCTION
TO THE 1977 EDITION

The present is the future of the past. Driving back into Boston the other night, I looked across the river at the not especially spectacular skyline of East Cambridge and saw it as nineteenth-century man might have seen it: as parabolic and luminous splendor continuous and coolly on fire, as pyramids piled of cubes of light, each high-rise apartment building gigantic perforated lantern twinned in the black river and crowding the sky with golden outpourings of energy. Even the glowing advertising signs—FOOD FAIR, ELECTRONIC CORPORATION AMERICA—appeared magnificent, unaccountable, authoritative in their strangeness. Who had seen such a marvel here? Only a race of gods, it seemed, could inhabit and power this ribbon of the future unrolling on the far shore of the Charles. I was amazed, an alien.

Twenty years before I had stood by a low wall in Shillington, my birthplace in Pennsylvania, and looked down at the razed acres where for all of my boyhood the poorhouse had been. I have described it elsewhere:

At the end of our street there was the County Home—an immense yellow poorhouse, set among ... orchards and lawns, surrounded by a sandstone wall that was low enough on one side for a child to climb easily, but that on the other side offered a drop of twenty or thirty feet, enough to kill you if you fell. Why this should have been, why the poorhouse grounds should have been so deeply recessed on the Philadelphia Avenue side, puzzles me now.... But at the time it seemed perfectly natural, a dreadful pit of space congruent with the pit of time into which the old people (who could be seen circling silently in the shade of the trees whose very tops were below my feet) had been plunged by some mystery that would never touch me. That I too would come to their condition was as unbelievable as that I would really fall and break my neck.*

Now the poorhouse was gone. Out of the hole where it had been, there came to me the desire to write a futuristic novel in commemoration of the fairs that I had attended here as a child.

Backward time, forward time carve the same abyss. The novel of the future seeks to give us in concentrated form the taste of time that flavors all novels, that makes their events more portentous than the events of our lives, where time passes unnoticed, but for the random shudder, and the mechanical schedule. With superb and dreadful poetry H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* moved its hero through time so fast that he "saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day"; upon acceleration "the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness" and "the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch, in space." The sun, simultaneous symbol of life and of its transience, is visited by the Time Traveller on the verge of its own extinction, when it hangs in the sky "red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat." He pushes thirty million years further on, to when "the huge red hot dome of the sun had come to obscure nearly a tenth part of the darkling heavens." It is bitterly cold. The sea is blood-red and tideless. The sole signs of life are green slime and a vague creature out on a sandbank—"it was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering

blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about.” How horrifyingly real, to my thirteen-year-old imagination, was that animated cartoonish survivor (oblong in my mind like an American football, instead of round like an English one) at the end of the world. The vision could not be dismissed; it was a nightmare that, as would my own death, *would come to pass*.

The totalitarian nightmare of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, like the Eloi/Morlocks class war of Wells’s fable, would *not* come to pass, at least in the United States: so it seemed to the patriotic adolescent. Reading Orwell’s novel in my late teens, I was titillated by its anti-Soviet allegory; but the book developed a claw of iron when O’Brien, Big Brother’s spokesman (and a cousin perhaps of my Conner), told the captive hero:

“You must stop imagining that posterity will vindicate you, Winston. Posterity will never hear of you. You will be lifted clean out from the stream of history. We shall turn you into gas and pour you into the stratosphere. Nothing will remain of you: not a name in a register, not a memory in a living brain. You will be annihilated in the past as well as in the future. You will never have existed.”

Orwell knew he was dying as he wrote that terrible imprecation; personal dread drove him to touch futurism’s black center: the death of everything. The ultimate fruit of the future is non-existence. Not only our egos but all their memorials and progeny are swallowed by the sun’s bloating, by the stars’ slowing, by entropy. Congealed of gas, we return to gas. In Huxley’s *Brave New World*, which I read at a still later, admittedly less impressionable age, death occurs, but without immensity. The Savage’s suicide at the end is mockingly objectified and trivialized even: the corpse’s dangling feet, slowly twirling, give the directions of the compass. As in our mundane reality, it is others that die, while an attenuated silly sort of life bubbles decadently on. This is, one could say, the vision of the future offered in *The Poorhouse Fair*.

The novel was written in 1957, as a deliberate anti-*Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Its events, asserted in the solicitous flap copy that was then left off the first printing, occurred “about twenty years from now”—that is, now, twenty years later. The pre-dating was done with some accidental imprecision. John Hook, the hero, is ninety-four; in the first pages he remembers himself freshly graduated from normal school in “the fat Taft’s administration.” Taft was President from 1909 to 1913; assuming that normal school in Hook’s day meant a two-year post-high-school curriculum, he would be twenty years old upon graduation, which would put his birth between 1889 and 1893, and the time of my novel right around 1984. But I wanted it to fall short of that year, as its political ambiance fell short of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s dire absolutism; in the Modern Library edition (now out of print) I amended the administration to “the first Roosevelt’s,” Taft’s predecessor. TR’s ample reign (1901–1909) places my future’s near rim in the late months of 1975 (McKinley was assassinated in September of 1901) and is amply congruent with the novel’s other muddled checkpoint ([the page](#)), the anniversary of the St. Lawrence Seaway, whose opening in 1959 was itself in the haze of the future when I pinned my novel to it. At first I had the anniversary “silver,” the twenty-fifth, which again nudges 1984; for the Modern Library I altered this to “crystal,” which, as the fifteenth, places it too soon; “china,” the twentieth anniversary, is in the middle, though it sounds brittle. But the entire editorial, as a piece of prediction, lives up to its quaint style.

How do they match up, the world of *The Poorhouse Fair* and the world that surrounds it?

now? As long ago as 1964 it seemed necessary to say, in a brief foreword to the Modern Library edition, that

I meant the future it portrays to be less a predictive blueprint than a caricature of contemporary decadence. Though I expected that some details would be rendered obsolete, I did not imagine that Hook's rhetorical question ... "Isn't it significant, now, that of the three presidents assassinated, all were Re-publican?" might abruptly become impossible. I have let it stand, as a vivid anachronism. I thought, in 1957, fondly composing this latter version of the stoning of St. Stephen, that the future did not radically differ from the past; and this notion now seems itself a product of the entropic years of the Eisenhower lull.

Not only was John Kennedy assassinated in the twenty years prior to 1977, but another President resigned, and the Vietnam Involvement escalated and collapsed, and with it a wave of civil dissent such as has not been seen in this country since the Civil War. It is hard to know what Hook refers to when he says, on [this page](#), that "This last decade has witnessed the end of the world, if the people would but wake to it." He cannot be referring to the Arab oil boycott and the rising squeeze on raw materials, for the automobiles that come to the poorhouse seem to be still of Fifties dimensions, and the poorhouse furniture has a reassuring ring of solid stuff, of brass and rubber and frosted glass; the tags on the porch chairs are sturdy metal, and simple "soybean plastics" represent our throwaway multitude of synthetic polymers. Nor can Hook be thinking of the global realignments that place the Soviet bloc with the "have" nations and turn Russia and China to enemies and encourage our own surprising rapprochement with the red dragon, for Truman is still remembered as the President who "gave away China to the Russians." Something called the "London Pacts with the Eurasian Soviet"—a bow, it may be, to *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* division of the planet into Eurasia, Eastasia, and Oceania—dominates the peace wherein American population soars "like diffident India's." Our population no longer soars, as it turns out. *The Poorhouse Fore* foresees widespread voyeurism but not the pornography boom; its popular culture has the wrong Hispanic accent, but the brown tint seems right. The romantic vanities of Ted the truck-driver and Conner the youthful poorhouse prefect savor more of a Forties boyhood than of our guarded, unenthusiastic Seventies. The characters reflect back through the riots and revolts of the Sixties as if they had never occurred—and so, to an extent, do we. There is a present truth in the sentence, "The nation became one of pleasure-seekers; the people continued to live as cells of a body do in the coffin, for the conception 'America' had died in their skulls." There are striking technological omissions: where are the computers, and the Xerox machines? Buddy should be using an electric typewriter, and can his typing table really be porcelain? Drugs, so much in our news and so prominent in *Brave New World*, figure only as a dose of flavored penicillin exclaimed over as a novelty by an anonymous fairgoer. An even stranger absence is that of television, crucial in Orwell's scheme of tyranny and the present-day mainstay, the continuous electronic *soma*, of nursing homes and retirement villages. Nothing is quainter about my old people than their never seeming to watch television, and their having to fall back for entertainment upon reminiscence and mischief. But, if the next seven years bear me out, I was right where Orwell was wrong: no atomic bombs have fallen, and the governmental forms of the major western democracies have not succumbed to Big Brother. In 1977 Hook continues his inward walk down a "long smooth gallery hung with the portraits of presidents of the United States," though a President

Lowenstein has not been one of them.

The main flaw of my “predictive blueprint” inheres in any attempt to predict the course of multiple and intercausative phenomena such as make up the life of a nation or a planet. We can extend the graph curve of present trends and be certain that existent vitalities will decline, but we cannot conceive of the new, of the entities born by intricate synthesis from collisions of the broadly known. Models of the future tend therefore to be streamlined models of the present, the present with its corners cut off. But it is these very corners that move into the center and become the future. They move unexpectedly and perhaps unpredictably, even to the supreme intelligence hypothesized by Laplace, who said, “nothing would be uncertain for such an intelligence, and the future like the past would be present to its eyes.” Determinist faith in essential predictability has been challenged, recently, by David Layzer, who, deploying the laws of thermodynamics and the concept of phase space, concludes that “not even the ultimate computer—the universe itself—ever contains enough information to completely specify its own future states. The present moment always contains an element of genuine novelty and the future is never wholly predictable.”† It is such a future, an unpredictable one wreathed in mists as of nostalgia, a fuzzy old-fashioned notion of a future, that I tried to render in this novel, imitating not the science-fiction classics mentioned above but the obscure poetic *Concluding*, by Henry Green. *The Poorhouse Fair* shares with *Concluding* an embarrassing number of particulars: an old estate housing a vague State-run institution (a girls’ school, in Green’s case), a not-too-distant time-to-come (fifty-five years hence, *Concluding*’s jacket flap stated in 1948), an elderly monosyllabic hero (Mr. Rock), a multileveled action drifting through one day’s time, a holiday (Green’s fête, Founder’s Day, even falls, like the poorhouse fair, on a Wednesday), heraldic animals, much meteorological detail, and a willful impressionist style.

—Old and deaf, half blind, Mr. Rock said about himself, the air raw in his throat. Nevertheless he saw plain how Ted was not ringed in by fog. For the goose posed staring, head to one side, with a single eye, straight past the house, up into the fog bank which had made all daylight deaf beneath, and beyond which, at some clear height, Mr. Rock knew now there must be a flight of birds fast winging,—Ted knows where, he thought.

That is from Green’s first page; this is from mine:

In the cool wash of early sun the individual strands of osier compounding the chairs stood out sharply; arched like separate serpents springing up and turning again into the knit of the wickerwork. An unusual glint of metal pierced the lenient wall of Hook’s eyes and struck into his brain, which urged his body closer, to inspect.

The innocently bold eclecticism of my youth rouses my envy now. A million or more published words later, my sentences are less purely mine than these stolen from Green, with their winsome inversions confident as a child’s speech (“With the eye it was not difficult to follow the shining squares all the way down the line”) and their soft straining to combine sensual “touch” and subjective mythifying (“Despite the low orange sun, still wet from its dawning, crescents of mist like the webs of tent caterpillars adhered in the crotches of the hills”).

The novel, reread, seems best when it deals with John Hook and at its weakest with Conner; the antagonists rotate the novel in and out of credibility. Conner, in his thirties, was

too young for me to understand; what goes on in his cupola I guessed at as I guessed at what went on in the principal's office of my high school. ("A principle is a rule," the spelling teachers used to tell us, "but the principal is your *pal*.") A nervous self-conscious shyness, and maneuvering around that shyness, dominate Conner and Buddy as if they were adolescents. Conner is a high-school goodie-goodie, trying to make his way among sardonic rowdies, tied by pious ambition to invisible grown-ups—invisible like the grown-ups in *Peanuts*, like the human beings in Kafka's "Investigations of a Dog." He should have been more. Where Hook's antiquity shrinks him to the scope of my still basically childish imagination. His physical and visual impairments impose the same magical discontinuities that a child's handicaps of perspective and ability do. Like a child he is in love with the world and hopes that the world loves him. He is alert for clues, though blind to patterns. His perceptual style controls the book; the parakeet, the rabbit on the lawn, the "silver zeppelins" of Lucas's pig (there are swine in Green, too) are seized upon with relief, as something alive but intelligible, by the presiding, animistic imagination. The flap copy went:

Animals haunt the landscape, and inanimate objects—a sandstone wall, a row of horsechestnut trees, a pile of pebbles—strain wordlessly toward the humans, who act out their quarrels of tradition versus progress, benevolence versus pride, on a ground riddled with omens and overborne by a massive, variable sky. The author seems to separate sense and existence; the chatter of the mob that comes to the fair in its sense illustrates the national decay that obsesses the pensioners, yet in its existence, isolated by bits in the air, shares with grass and stones a positive, even cheering, *anima*.

There is, then, a philosophical ambition here; an attempt, no less, to present the meaning of being alive, as conveyed by its sensations. Our eager innate life, rebounding from the exterior world, affirms itself, and the quality of affirmation is taken to be extrinsic and immanent, divine. I needed God to exist. My claim that the banal American chatter that dissolves the novel at the end manifests "a positive, even cheering, *anima*" is a leap of aesthetic faith sheerly—a child's delight in being up late, eating licorice while grown-up conversations make a sky of safety above his head, recalled fifteen years later and forcibly assigned a clinching position in an argument sketched, I see now, along Thomist lines. Like Thomist proof the novel moves from proposition to objections to counter-objections. The distinction between essence and being (*essentia* and *ens*) I took from St. Thomas; with his help I sought to consecrate, to baptize into American religiosity, those three very atheistic Englishmen, Wells, Orwell, and Henry Green. The original manuscript ended a page sooner upon the Chestertonian lament "to guard the gates of the deserted kingdom." Small wonder the ending baffled what were to have been the book's publishers; good luck or Providence led me to an editor, Stewart Richardson, and a publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, who to my lasting gratitude printed this book in a format as exquisite as my intentions, my text unaltered.

That was twenty years ago. Now I notice, in this text, amid the religious schemata, a less-conscious pattern, announced by the sentence already quoted, about the strands of osier arching like separate serpents springing up and turning again into the knit of the wickerwork. The image forced itself upon me at the outset of the action; it returns on [this page](#), as Hook remembers himself as a child examining his bedcovers, "searching for the deeper-dyed threads that occasionally, in the old woven cloth, would arch above the others." This microcosmic event is dramatically enlarged when, amid the schoolyard rumpus of the stoning, Hook

studying the interwoven clouds of the sky, has “his narrow field of vision crossed by a flow of arrowing stones, speeding through the air in swift flocks, and before he considered, he had the thought that here was something glorious. Battles of old had swayed beneath such a canopy of missiles” ([this page](#)). The hurled stones arch; and so the entire incident itself arches up out of the fabric of the day, and then is turned again into the knit of the gossip that ends the day. Buddy carries the scandal into the crowd ([this page](#)) and composes a comic headline in the air ([this page](#)); by [this page](#), amid the threads of several other rumored scandals, the event is anonymously made to yield a moral (“you sometimes need a man with a look of authority”) and allowed to fade from the common discourse.

The people who had come to the fair talked more slowly, tending toward affectionate gossip about the past they had in common as citizens of the town, and about roads and schools and old houses sold. Coarsened hands of still handsome women nervously tucked back stray strands of hair; young mothers pouted under the weight of sleeping babies.

Ipswich has displaced Shillington behind this evocation. The Massachusetts town where I wrote this novel, in the three summer months of our first year there, has begun to intrude upon the remembered town; young mothers and sleeping babies join my cast of characters. Our babysitter in the new town had a pet parakeet.

Life goes on; stray strands are tucked back; the stoning has sprung up and been turned again into the knit. All is flux; nothing lastingly matters. Such pessimism came more naturally to the author of *The Poorhouse Fair* than his hopeful detection of a world-soul. For me, the most surprising—the most abruptly *given*—image occurs on the penultimate page; the stars are perceived as “not specks but needles of light suspended point downward in a black depth of stiff jelly.” Earlier ([this page](#)), Hook, praying, had felt his mind as “a point within an infinitely thick blanket.” We are *within*, the young author feels, honestly claustrophobic—within a universe where the sun daily grows “orange, oblate, and distended”[‡] and the ship plunges to its death like some Titanic deity. For a while the furrow plowed by its plunge glows “the color of an unnatural element, transuranic, created atom by atom in the scientist’s laboratory, at inestimable expense” but, as the sick-ward patients watch, clouds propelled by evening winds obscure the golden chasm. The poorhouse is fair, I wanted to say, against my suspicions that it is, our universe, a poor house for us.

The book was published early in 1959. Wright Morris and Mary McCarthy found kind words to say of it, and Mary Ellen Chase published in the *Herald Tribune* a review of extraordinary enthusiasm and warmth. Others found it precious, for all the “phenomenal composure” of the prose. *Time*, after what I took to be a panning, cited it among “The Year’s Best” and I had the pleasure of seeing myself anointed, in their regal way, “Gifted Writer Updike.” *The Poorhouse Fair* arched back smoothly into the vast knit of past seasons’ books. It sold about eight thousand copies, and has been kept in print by the publisher’s generous policy in this regard. This is its sixth printing; the fifth was in 1966. A few lingering typographical mistakes have been cleared up, the historical clues have been adjusted as mentioned above, Gregg’s expression “a.h.” has been liberalized to “a.hole” (though I am pleased with my solution, for those days, to the problem of printed obscenities; better my abbreviations than non-words like “fug” or eye-catching dashes), and what appears to be the same boy at the fair has been given the same name throughout, Mark. Otherwise the text is unchanged; I could not write this novel now, and will respect the man who could. He wanted

to lay down in these theorems and raptures the foundation for a tower of volumes, its title slogan to prosper by. A few days ago I submitted the manuscript for my twentieth book. The future is now; it is as if, standing by that poorhouse wall, I threw myself down, into the pit of time, and, my neck unbroken, find myself here.

JOHN UPDIKE
Boston, Mass

**Assorted Prose*, 1965, p.156.

†“The Arrow of Time,” *Scientific American*, December 1975, pp. 56–69.

‡Cf., of course, the sun at the end of *The Time Machine*. And, of the stars, this sentence by Wells may have been in my memory: “The circling of the stars, growing slower and slower, had given place to creeping points of light.”

By another of its monstrous feats, the passage of time has put more years between now and the above introduction than had lapsed between the 1977 introduction and the composition in 1957, of *The Poorhouse Fair*. Thirty more of my books have piled up, including another futuristic novel, *Toward the End of Time*, written in 1996 and taking place in 2020; already certain particulars of its projected world have gone askew. The fictional future is bound to be a caricature of the present, a tangent thrown off from a minute arc of an unpredictable twisting curve. In recent decades the Soviet Union has ceased to exist, a woman and a Jew have run for vice-president on two national Democratic tickets, militant Islam has put homeland security on every American's mind, AIDS has blighted the world's blood, and a thousand other events have occurred beyond my first novel's imagining. Nevertheless, this little book rings truer to me, in its ground note of benignly persisting muddle, than the triumphant totalitarianism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. A worried socialism fiddles in the cupola while the crowds below mill about, full of their own concerns. Catastrophes occur, but are not globally terminal. The survivors (and all of us living are survivors) will find reasons—dreams, hopes, fantastic beliefs—to reinforce their necessary optimism. Life goes on: not the most electric prophecy, but the most likely of fulfillment.

In the matter, much mooted on pages xii–xiii, of the exact time when my fair takes place, I have decided to go with the original text, and have restored Taft and silver to their place. First inspirations are generally the best. Nevertheless, I did not resist changing a word or adding a touch here and there, if these small improvements seemed to arrive from within the spirit and architectonic plan of the fledgling novelist.

JOHN UPDIKE
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts

I

“WHAT’S THIS?”

“What’s what?”

“Why, *look*.”

In the cool wash of early sun the individual strands of osier compounding the chairs stood out sharply; arched like separate serpents springing up and turning again into the knit of the wickerwork. An unusual glint of metal pierced the lenient wall of Hook’s eyes and struck into his brain, which urged his body closer, to inspect. Onto the left arm of the chair that was customarily his in the row that lined the men’s porch the authorities had fixed a metal tag perhaps one inch by two, bearing MR, printed, plus, in ink, his latter name. A reflex of pride twitched the corners of his mouth; he had always preferred, in the days when certain honors were allowed him, to have his name spelled in full, with the dignity of the middle initials John F. Hook. On the adjoining chair the name of his companion, Gregg, was similarly imposed. With the eye it was not difficult to follow the shining squares all the way down the line.

“What birdbrain scheme is this now of Conner’s?” Gregg asked noisily, as if the taller man might not hear. “Is he putting tags on us so we can be trucked off to the slaughterhouse?”

“Well, yes: what is it? A child must tinker.”

“They’ll come right off,” Gregg said and produced from the hip pocket of his shapeless wool trousers a black bone jackknife of the old style, with a blade for removing the metal caps from bottles. With this blunt blade he adroitly began to loosen, not his own nameplate, but Hook’s.

Gregg’s small brown hands, the thumbs double-jointed and spatulate and the backs covered with dark lines as fine as hair, sought leverage with a quickness that recalled to Hook that his companion had been, before alcohol and progress had undone him, an electrician.

“Here,” Hook said, hoarse as much from the discomfort it caused him to focus his eyes on an action so near at hand as from disapproval. In truth he felt helpless. He enjoyed no real control over Gregg, though some crooked whim or weakness led the younger man lately to cling close to Hook’s presence. It was Hook’s misfortune to have the appearance of authority yet lack the gift of command. He sought a reason that would stay Gregg. “If we forget our place, they’ll take the chairs themselves off, and we’ll be left to stand.”

“And then all die of heart attacks; I hope we do. It’ll make a fine black mark in Conner’s book, to have us all keel over without a place to sit.”

“It’s a sin to talk on so,” Hook exclaimed positively, for death, to his schoolteacher’s mind, was a bell that must find the students with their noses to the desks. “And,” he went on, “it’s a mis-take for the old to molest others’ property. The young now, the young have nothing and may be winked at when they steal a foretaste; but those who have had what there was

be had are expected to be beyond such foolishness. We fellas so close to the Line”—he raised his voice on this last word, inclined his head, and lifted his right hand in a dainty gesture, the index and little fingers pointing upward and the two between curled down—“have our accounts watched very close.” The disciplinarian’s instinct—which was somewhat developed though he had always lacked the cruelty to be the disciplinarian paramount—told him the words had been correct for the purpose; he had a shadowy sense that what Gregg sought in his company were elevated forms of thought to shape and justify the confused rage he felt toward the world that had in the end discarded him. Also, there was something in the relationship of Hook’s teaching the younger man how to be old; Hook at ninety-four had been old a third of his life, whereas Gregg, just seventy, had barely begun.

“Ah, we can pick them off with our fingers any time we want,” Gregg said with contempt, and, nimbly as a monkey on a rubber tire in the old-fashioned zoos, he turned and sat in Hook’s chair, rather than the one labelled as his own.

“Modern day workmen are not what they were,” Hook stated, satisfied. Standing on the porch edge, he rested his gaze in the comfortable depths to the east and north of the porch, the shallowly concave farm plains tilled in scientifically irregular patches, the nearer lands belonging to the jurisdiction of the Poor Home; further off, small hills typical of New Jersey presiding above, a ribbed sky, pink, betokening rain. The blurred click of Gregg’s blade being snapped back into the sheath satisfied him still further. Pain ebbed from the muscles of his eyeballs as they lengthened to suit the horizon, and he felt positive pleasure. Despite the low orange sun, still wet from its dawning, crescents of mist like the webs of tent caterpillars adhered in the crotches of the hills. Preternaturally sensitive within its limits, his vision made out the patterned spheres of an orchard on the nearest blue rise, seven miles off. Beyond and beyond the further hills, he knew ran the Delaware. His life had been spent on that river, white in morning, yellow at noon, black by supper. On the other side had stood a green rim of Pennsylvania. In those days—it would have been in the fat Taft’s administration—when Hook had freshly come, direct from normal school, to teach at a building of then less than a hundred pupils, walking to work had taken him along a path from which, down the long bar through switches of sumac and sapling oak, glimpses of water had appeared as white and smooth as a plaster wall. The path ascended, passing beneath a red oak where children had attached a knotted rope and on the trunk had nailed a ladder of slats. At the highest point three shacks housing the humblest elements of the town commanded a broad view. The bar was so steep here the tops of the tallest trees clinging to it were lower than one’s own shoes. The river’s apparent whiteness was dissolved in its evident transparency: the contours of banks of silt and industrial waste could be easily read beneath the gliding robe of water. A submerged bottle reflected sunlight. Occasionally, among the opaque fans of corrugations spread by each strand of shore growth, the heavy oblong of a catfish could be spied drifting. The family in one of the shacks did woodcutting; the air at this place in the path where Hook usually paused always smelled of sawdust, even in winter, through the snow. And across the width of water a curtain of trees hung, united with its reflection, unmarked by a house or a puff of smoke. To Hook Pennsylvania had been the westerly wilderness, and when he crossed the bridge at Trenton it surprised him to encounter houses and streetcars as advanced as those in his native state.

His eyes had a thirst for water, but no amount of study would turn the blue-green hills into

a river, and even were the intervening land shaved as clear as a table top, the Delaware would be hidden from him by the curvature of the earth—eight inches to the mile, as he recalled it. His education was prominent in two places: Roman history, which he had received in the grammar school of his day, and nineteenth-century American politics, talk of which had filled his father's home.

Closer to where he stood, on this side of the rough sandstone wall the women were beginning to move about on the dark grass, picking up sticks and carrying tables; foolish women, the dew would soak their feet.

"The sky suggests rain," he said, returning to Gregg in voice while not moving.

"The f.ing bastard I have half a mind to snip every one of these rotten tags off and throw them in his birdbrain face."

These wild words were not worth answering, and an answer, no matter what, would involve him deeper with Gregg. He felt distaste for Gregg: Gregg was like a student who having been given the extra attention due the sheep in a hundred that has strayed, the refuses to know his place, and makes of the instructor's consideration cause for a displeasing familiarity. Yet Gregg's physical aspect, and specifically the small, stained, wrinkle-hatched, dour and dangerous face that left no impression of its eyes, inspired persistent affection, reminding Hook of Harry Petree. Against Harry Petree's memory Hook abruptly shut his mind.

He said, "Aren't the women foolish now, to be setting up for the fair with a storm at the elbows? They'll be bringing in those tables before noon. No doubt Conner put them up to it."

The sense of moisture ascending was everywhere: on the sandstone walls, some stones wet and others without clear reason dry; in the odor of the freshened grass; in the amplified sound of the grackles in the maples to the left and the chatter of the women down below; in the hazy solid movements of the women. Tens of thousands of such mornings had Hook seen.

The deepening of the sky, however, above the southeast horizon, where it should be lightest, and the proclamatory weight of the slow wind that fitfully blew, were peculiar to this day.

"A bit of ago," he stated, "the sky was savage red."

Gregg raved on, "What we ought to do is take one of these tabs every day and mail it to him, a different tab every day; the post office can't refuse our custom."

"Such talk," Hook sighed, lowering himself philosophically into the chair to the left of Gregg, his customary position. Since Gregg was sitting not on the chair labelled his own but perversely in Hook's, Hook correspondingly occupied a wrong chair. When George Lucas came around the porch, from the side beneath the maples, he unthinkingly sat beside Hook as he always did. "Have you noticed these tags?" Hook asked his other friend.

"The damn bastard Conner," Gregg shouted across, "I have half a mind to strip every one of them off."

Lucas was a fat man, yellowish in complexion, with a brief hooked nose. Young by the standards of the place, he had been a truck farmer in the southern wedge of Diamond County. His land had been requisitioned by a soybean combine organized by the Federal Department of Conservation. With the money they paid Lucas he had begun a real estate business in the nearest town, where he was well known, and had failed. He knew land but displeased people. Hook himself, charitable and gregarious to a fault, found it hard to enjoy association with

Lucas, not because of the man's bluntness, but because he seemed preoccupied still with the strings of the outer world and held himself aloof from the generality of inmates. His friendship with Hook, Hook felt, served some hidden use. As a legally declared bankrupt, Lucas had come to the poorhouse less than three years past, the winter of Mendelssohn's funeral. He was forever digging in his ear with a wooden match to keep an earache alive. "No," he said, "where are the tags?" As he said this an instinct made him lift the writing beneath which the silver rectangle glittered.

"They put these on the chairs so we won't lose our way," Hook stated with irony.

"But this ain't mine, it's Benjie's chair," Lucas was saying, having read the name imbedded in the arm.

"A child like Conner must tinker endless-ly," Hook continued, deafened by his own chain of thought. He felt his wrist being lifted and his wine-dark lips quivered with being startled. He gradually brought his eyes to bear on the man inches from him.

"This is my chair," Lucas said. "You have it."

"Well, Billy is seated in mine."

"Come on then, Gregg: get up," Lucas said.

Furious, Gregg screamed between held teeth, "That son of a bitch I'd like to stick one of these tabs down his throat and listen to the f.ier scream when he tried to pass it."

Bending and bowing in a variety of friezes, the three men each moved up one chair in the long row that with the earliness of the hour was full in a bar of dull bronze sun.

"Rain," Lucas said, seated again.

"Goddamn it I hope it pours buckets and washes out the whole damn business. We'll see then how high and mighty Conner thinks he is."

"And have no fair?" Lucas said. "The women love it so." His wife was also at the Home.

Settled in his own chair Hook felt more in charge. "Depend upon it," he said, "there are no workmen now as there were in my day. The carpenters of fifty years ago could drive a stone nail as long as my finger in three strokes. The joints that they would fit: pegs and wedges cut out of the end of a beam to the fineness of a hair, and not split the wood though they were right with the grain. And how they would hunt, for the prongs of the old-time carriages, to find a young birch that had been bent just that way. To use the wood of a branch was considered of a piece with driving two nails where one would hold. The cut nails, you know. Then wire became common, and all their thinking was done for them by the metal manufacturers."

"Now it's all soybean plastics," Lucas said.

"Yes: to make a juice and pour it into a mold and watch it harden. What is there in that? Rafe Beam, my father's handy man, could split a sunflower seed with his hatchet so you couldn't tell between the two halves. He used to say to me, 'Aren't you fearful of standing so close?', then he'd touch the blade to my nose, so gay-making, and show me the end of his thumb between his fingers." He demonstrated and smiled.

"Dontcha think," Gregg called to Lucas, "we ought to do something about this putting our names on the chairs like branding f.ing cattle?"

Hook resented this appeal, across him, to the other man. Lucas, deep in his ear, showed no disposition to answer, so Hook announced, "Caution is the bet-ter part of action. No doubt it is an aspect of Conner's wish to hold us to our place. An-y motion on our part to threaten h

security will make him that much more unyielding. They used to say, 'A wise dog lets the leash hang limp.' It might be more politic, now, if we breathe a word to the twin, and he gives his explanation. You may be sure of this: tear yours off now and a new one will be on before noon."

"The twin," Gregg said contemptuously. "He knows less what goes on in Conner's piddling brain than we do."

"Ah, don't be that sure," Hook said. "We old fellas, we don't know the half of what goes on."

"The twin isn't even half a man he's half a moron. What I think is we ought to go up to Conner in a body and say, 'O.K., Birdbrain Conner, treat us like humans instead of stinking animals or we'll write our grievances to the government in Washington.' The post office can refuse our custom, we aren't sunk that low yet."

Hook smiled thinly. The sun had so risen that the shadow of the porch eave was across his eyes, while his lips and chin remained in the bronze light of the haze-softened sun. His lips appeared to speak therefore with individual life, "We must bide our time. Any sizeable motion on our part will make Conner that much more in-secure. Now Rafe Beam used to recite,

'A wise old owl
Sat in an oak.
The more he heard,
The less he spoke.
The less he spoke,
The more he heard:
Let's imi-tate
This wise old bird.' "

Lucas, grimacing, had been digging into his ear, and now, watery-eyed from the pain, studied his two companions. Then, his eyes on the sulphur end of the matchstick, he said, "If you want, I'll go up to Conner and ask what his idea was."

Hook's sole answer was to draw up to his height in his chair; his face lifted entirely into shadow. The corners of his lips were downdrawn as fine as pencil points. Lucas had no fear of Conner; it was what everyone had noticed. Hook had momentarily forgotten.

"You give him this," Gregg said, and he held up and vibrated a skinny white fist, yellow with the sun, "and tell him it came from me."

CONNER'S office was approached by four flights of narrowing stairs, troublesome for these old people. Accordingly few came to see him. He intended in time to change this; it was among the duties of the prefect, as he conceived the post, to be accessible. It had not been his predecessor Mendelssohn who had chosen to center the executive in the cupola. Why Conner could guess from the look of the man in his coffin and the layout of the building. Though the fourth flight, the last and narrowest—tan unpainted stairs rising between green walls barely a shoulders'-breadth apart—led only to the cupola and alone led away from it, once this brief diagonal descent had been made a man could easily thread unseen through the

third floor—half of it the closed doors of the bed-ridden—to the rear stairs, and thus reach the out-of-doors, and sneak behind the pig buildings and along the edge of the west wall into the adjacent town of Andrews, where Mendelssohn was well-known as a daytime drinker. The altitude of the office assured that it would seldom be visited, except by Mendelssohn's subordinates, who understood him. Further, the view commanded from the cupola was inclusive and magnificent. From what Conner had seen in the coffin—the ponderous balding head, the traces of Jewishness in the vital nostrils and the smile the embalmers had been unable to erase from the lips like the lips of a gash long healed, the faint eyebrows, the unctuously, painfully lowered lids—Mendelssohn had in part thought of himself as God.

Conner thought of no one as God. The slats of light from the east and south windows broken into code by the leaves and stems of the plants on the sills, spoke no language to him. He had lost all sense of omen. Rising as early as Hook, he had looked at the same sky and seen nothing but promise of a faultless day for the fair. Young for the importance of his position, devout in the service of humanity, Conner was unprepossessing: the agonizingly unworthy of him, he underwent in the presence of unsympathetic people was sensed by them, and they disliked him for it. The ignorant came to him and reaped more ignorance; he had no gift of conversion. The theatre of his deeds was filled with people he would never meet—the administrators, the report-readers—and beyond these black blank heads hung the white walls of the universe, the listless, permissive mother for whom Conner felt not a shudder of awe, though, orthodox in the way of popular humanist orators, he claimed he did. Yet there were a few—*friends*, he supposed. Buddy was one, the twin, tapping out budgetary accounts at his porcelain table in the corner of the spacious room. Frequently Conner could feel Buddy's admiration and gratitude as a growing vegetal thing within himself, fed by his every action, especially the more casual; the joking words, the moan over a tangled business, the weary rising at the end of the day to pour, out of a wax-paper cup, a little drinking water on the roots of the decorative plants—like the Venetian blinds, a post-Mendelssohnian innovation. Moving in, Conner had found the office bare, drab, dirty, unordered: a hole where a tramp napped.

“Conner? Hey, Conner.” It was Lucas's habit to come halfway up the last flight and then shout, his voice highly acoustical in the narrow enclosure. Conner did not know how to correct him; there was no bell; he did not know how they did it in Mendelssohn's day, nor did Lucas, Lucas and his wife having entered the place a month after the new prefect.

“Yes, George. Come on up.” He frowned for Buddy to see and kept his hands on the piece of paper he had been reading, a letter from an anonymous townsman. Buddy's hands ostentatiously rapped on, not compromising his noise for their visitor. The twin's brain in boyhood had been soaked in thrillers, and to him Lucas was the Informer, indispensable yet despicable.

Indeed, that Lucas, in the midst of such general hostility, should be comparatively natural with him made Conner himself uneasy. The man perhaps thought he was winning kindness for his wife, though there was no evidence that he was; impartiality with Conner was a crucial virtue. By way of comment on his puffing, Lucas said, “A lot of stairs. You'd think you were hiding.”

Conner smiled mechanically, his eyes glancing to the letter; *help not hinder, I myself, and rights* leaped from between his fingers. He lacked the presence, however, to hold a silence

"Martha getting her cake made?" he asked, clipping away minor words in embarrassment being conventionally cordial.

"She's fussing at something, I know."

"You must be glad," Conner said, "that she's on her feet again." He felt this remark instantly as fatuous; of course Lucas was glad. Yet he had meant it well, and he felt irritation at the invisible apparatus that, placed between himself and any of the inmates, scrupulously judged the content of expressions that were meant to be carelessly amiable.

To his relief Lucas removed their talk to the plane of business. "They noticed their names on the porch chairs downstairs."

Conner's heart tripped, absurdly. He should have given up hope of pleasing them long ago; it was enough to help them. Ideally, his dedication wore blinders, but he was too weak not to glance to the side for signs of approval. The sculptor has his rock and the saint the silence of his Lord, but a man like Conner who has vowed to bring order and beauty out of human substance has no third factor; he is a slave, at first, to gratitude. In time, he knew, this tender place grows callous; he had heard the older men whose disciple he was discuss, not entirely in joking, mass murder as the ultimate kindness the enlightened could perform for the other. "From your tone," he said to Lucas, "I take it their noticing should cause me anxiety."

"Well, they're confused. They can't read your purpose."

"Who is they?"

Lucas poked something small and wooden into his ear and made a face of pain, his clayey skin eroding in rivers suddenly.

"You needn't name them," Conner added.

"Hook and Gregg were the ones I heard talking about it."

"Hook and Gregg. Poor Gregg, of course, is one notch removed from dementia. Hook is something else. Tell me, do you think Hook is senile?"

"In the head? No."

"Then there must be a rational cause that has set him against me."

"Oh, he's not against you. He just talks on the first thing that comes into his mind."

"And I'm always in his mind. What better friend does he think he has than myself? Hook has been here fifteen years; he knows what it was like under Mendelssohn."

Lucas looked startled to be feeling the edge of an apologia that was, Conner realized, principally excited by the preposterous and insulting letter he had been reading. "He speaks real well of him," Lucas said, with an odd steadiness of his eyes. "I have no opinion; I can't see here after you."

"Half the county home acres were lying fallow, waste. The outbuildings were crammed with refuse and filth. The west wing was a death trap. When Hook, last autumn, ate that unwashed peach, he would have died if Mendelssohn had still been in charge."

"Doesn't anybody realize," Buddy interjected in his somewhat frantic boy's voice, "what Mr. Conner has done here? This home has one of the five highest ratings in the northeastern sector."

"I read that on the bulletin board. It makes us all proud." Lucas's hands went to the side of his head, and his face crumpled again. This over, he asked soberly, "But now what was the idea about the nameplates?" *Dogged*, flashed on Conner as an adequate summation of Lucas.

Conner wondered if it were wisest to be silent. Words, any words, gave a person a piece of

yourself. Swiftly, reasons marshalled against this unworthy impulse:

You should not make shows of authority.

Lucas, fat and blunt and coarse-pored as he was, soiling the order of this office and the morning's routine, deserved politeness, as one of the unfortunates.

If Conner fudged, Lucas would convey the fact to the others.

The question was not, as it seemed (so strong was Conner's impression this moment of defiance and ingratitude everywhere), an impudence to which there is no answer.

There was an answer; everything Conner did he did for a reason; his actions were glass.

His motives occurred to him; he stared at the shine on Lucas's taut hooked nose and then shot his gaze to the sun-struck blinds at the window, saying, "There have been complaints, complaint—one of the women came to me, in regard to her husband—that on rainy days the men who work on the farm can't find chairs on the porch, or at least the chairs they think of as their own. The vacant chairs are scattered, so some are unable to sit with their friends. It is childish, of course. Mendelssohn, I'm sure, would have laughed her away. But I—my duty is to take all complaints seriously. Part of my policy has been, within the limits of the appropriations, to give the residents here some sense of ownership. I think especially of men like Hook, who have known a share of respect and prosperity. It strengthens, is my belief, rather than weakens a communal fabric to have running through it strands of private ownership. Lucas, I want to help these men to hold up their heads; to retain to the end the dignity that properly belongs to every member, big or little, of humanity."

He pivoted in his socketed chair and saw that in his typing corner Buddy was blushing jealously, to hear his superior speak with such fervor to an interloper. The boy (so touching in his blurted proclamation of their fifth-place honors) had perhaps assumed that the image of the thread of private property and the hope concerning dignity to the end had been a confidence shared between just the two of them. It would not do for Conner to explain, but even so much as the tone of his eyes, that in this instance, without disbelieving his words, he was using them more for their impact than their sense, more to keep Lucas at a distance than to convey a creed. When Conner had been Buddy's age he would have been repelled by any revelation to the effect that within the outer shell of a man's idealism is fitted a shell of cynicism; within this shell, another, contracted compared to the first, of idealism, and so closed down, in alternate black and white, to the indivisible center; and that it is by the color of the star here alone that the course of a man's life is set. Obliquely mitigating his unintended offense to Buddy, Conner mentioned his name in continuing to Lucas, "Mr. Lee, with a few of the other women, took much trouble in fixing each man's favorite chair. In some cases the old men themselves sat in a new place every day. The present arrangement is a work of love on his part. And yet Hook takes it as a cause of complaint. This is the reward Mr. Lee receives for the devotion he brings to his work in this institution; in private or semi-private industry his talents would earn him three times his present salary."

"Well, I'll tell them," Lucas said, though his attention for the last minute had been turned toward the inside of his head.

Perhaps still appeasing Buddy, Conner asked sharply, "What in hell are you doing to your ear?"

"A little soreness." Lucas went on the defensive; his head bowed and the pink inner skin of his cumbersome lower lip showed.

“For how long?”

“Not long.”

“A day? Two?”

“I guess longer.”

“You’ve been running an earache for longer than two days. What medication have you received?”

No answer.

Conner answered for him, “None.”

“I’ve had a soreness, off and on, for some time.”

He might have been speaking of an animal he had befriended. “Well, could you go to the west wing *now*, please? And throw the matchstick into the wastebasket. *This* wastebasket. Good God, you’ll give yourself otomycosis.” Conner hated, more than anything, pain dumbly endured. Oppression, superstition, misery—all sank their roots in meekness.

Lucas, turned into a child by this undeserved streak of rebuke, left as commanded. Conner, grieving for the bad temper brought on by the uneasy conscience unjustly forced on him by Buddy’s sulk and the letter on his desk, rose and stood by the east windows and looked down through parted blinds to people foreshortened on grass. On the east, south, and west sides the cupola had big windows, sets of three with round-arched tops, the middle one taller than the two flanking. The metal supporting the Venetian blinds muddled the stately lines, and the semi-circles, each fitted of five pieces of hand-worked wood, peeked above the manufactured horizontals like the upper margin of a fresco painted where now an exit has been broken through the wall. On the fourth side, the north, the steep stairway climbed from the floor below, contained within the external silhouette of the cupola, so that the door came into the room, making on each side of it an alcove, in which a simpler window had been let. Light at all times of the day came into the room; each standing object in it became a sundial, which no one there could read. The man, Walter Andrews, who seventy years before had built the mansion had meant this for the piano room; the system of supports and joints above had been left free, diagonal rafters and slender crossbeams where music could entwine, and the musicians grouped around the piano below could play on and on, feeding the growing cloud above without having their noise press out from the walls and crowd them. The piano was still in the room, underlying terraces of green steel cabinets. There was no way of getting it out; it had been hoisted up and set on the bare floor when the room was unfinished. When the east set of windows were the next day placed, the wall was open on blue air, the ends of the golden boards making a ragged hole in which the romantic black piano-shape appeared, a miracle, the ropes too thin it seemed, the workmen apprehensive, a breeze blowing, the points of the tapered legs tracing a fugal phrase *largo* on the emptiness as the huge instrument gently twirled in its secure cradle of rope. The piano within, the workers completed the woven knit wall, Andrews giving no consideration to the day after tomorrow or to the species that would follow his.

The tall space above, crossed with stained beams, catered to a kind of comfort not proper to executive and clerical work. Conner came from a world of low ceilings, squares of pressed composition dotted with small holes and made still lower by fluorescent structures. The space below made him uneasy, too. “Damn these people,” he said, his lips an inch from the sharp blond edge of a subtly curved slat of the blinds. “Now down there’s Hook, making his round

like the mayor of the place, talking to everybody, stirring them up for some crusade.”

To Buddy, watching, the profile of his superior was incisive against the luminous blind the little round nose above the long bulging lip of an Irishman, in saddened repose. In his rush of love Buddy had to speak, any words, and the first words came to him from what was bearing on his mind, “Don’t you think we could dispense with Lucas? He learns more than he tells, and physically, you must admit, he’s a monstrous error.”

“AH, Mrs. Jamiesson,” Hook said, “don’t the apples shine in your cheeks this morning? That’s what Ed Hertzog used to say, when greeting the women after church service.”

She was tacking an oilcloth frill to the front edge of the bare table she had set in the grass and he was standing in her way. “Could you hold that there with your fingers?” she asked him.

“De-lighted, posolutely delighted,” he said, mimicking someone else, a normal school chum, forty years dead, named Horace Frye. His downward vision was so poor he set his fingers along the naked edge of wood, and when Mrs. Jamiesson went with her hands for the hammer and tacks, the scalloped strip fell, the unfastened end of it into the drenched grass. As if managing a baby and his spoon she laid her tools aside and gripped his hand and brought the cloth to it and pressed his fingers against the edge. He let her drive one tack and stood away, his eyes on the top of the silver maple by the west wing. “That sound,” he announced, “is music to my ears; the carpenters in my day would drive a coarse nail with three swift strokes.”

“Well I guess I’m not one of them,” Mrs. Jamiesson said. She was a heavy woman whose homeliness had trained to a life of patience and affection. It was a wonder to her mother that this daughter, with the freakishly protuberant jaw, had married and held the man and raised a family. The waspish temper she had inherited from her beautiful mother Mary Jamiesson had repressed, a luxury she had to do without. Yet a lively tongue never quite dies. “It’s a rare sight for me,” she went on, “to see a man do any work; else I guess I’d learn something.”

Hook did not miss the sense of her remark, only its application to him. “It’s the admiration,” he confided. “To let a man choose idleness or labor, on the ground of whim: why not Mendelssohn’s time such a thing would never be seen. Able-bodied men like Gregg and Lucas—it’s a wonder they haven’t grown too lazy to lift the food to their mouths at mealtimes.”

“Lucas has the pigs, though.” Mrs. Lucas was a companion of hers.

“What day’s work is that, to carry the garbage from the kitchen to the trough?”

“Well it’s more than some do,” Mrs. Jamiesson observed.

Uneasiness crept over Hook. The woman’s implication—that women did the work of the place—was disagreeable to him, like a scent which raises the fine hairs on an animal. “Isn’t it strange now, the only muscle which never tires is the tongue,” he said, and moved on, forgetting who had begun this train of remarks. The dew-filmed lawn, now that the sun had moved higher, turned toward yellowness; in the center of the main walk, two old men were slowly unravelling electric cords, cardboard boxes of colored bulbs behind their legs. A stepladder lay flat in the grass. One of the men fumbled at a snarl as if this were his sole task for all the time remaining in God’s scheme. A robin scolded *wheep wheep* in the tree nearby. Beyond the south wall, the landscape extended itself generously; deliberate stands of trees were dotted like islands over the land; a few houses, outreaches of Andrews, intruded the

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