

In the Grips

Chris Nicholson

Man is a sign in pursuit of what eludes him.
—Martin Heidegger

Amid our infinite pillow talk while my heart was still at its height, Miss Jens once asked me when I fell in love with her exactly. Without even thinking, I told her it was a *coup de foudre* that night we met last May: a bolt of lightning, love at first sight. Strange as it may sound, a truer response would have been, *Before I ever laid eyes on you.*

I've never confessed this to Miss Jens, or to anyone else for that matter, but I am all of her ex-boyfriends. Even those who were never her boyfriends—useless suitors begging for a date, strangers calling out of the blue, forgotten acquaintances sending shy letters wrenched from monomaniacal hours—even they find their place inside this skull, these ribs. Each man and boy who has loved her, simultaneously and in succession from the third grade to this day, constitutes the past and continuous present of my heart. There's nothing crazy about it: just a bunch of normal guys in the grips, a bunch of guys who happen to inhabit me.

If you approach it from the right direction, the metempsychotic mechanism isn't hard to understand.

It's not that the boy in the third grade became the adolescent in the eleventh became the college professor, etc., until Miss Jens met me, but rather that a single, common spirit has possessed each one of us in turn, and moving on has established a certain continuity among us. It is a godlike love, pursuing Miss Jens through bodies and men and over continents as she flees before it.

Of that life called my own boyhood, I have but drab, unmoving memories at best. Whole years have been forgotten. Real life is in these lovers I've discovered through Miss Jens. Their stories overlap my own like snatches of another music played at odd moments through the day. And this love, if you can call it that, is a magnet re-northing my mind: each thought I might have called my own points to her.

Don't worry—I'm not going to bore you with a complete history of our affair (it would be as tedious as anything else that pretends to be complete), but as I tell this story I'd like to relate a few of those old loves so you'll see the forces in motion.

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The bell rang for recess and a tumble of dry leaves skittered and hesitated over the asphalt just past the school exits. The crust of grass in the schoolyard dipped and bobbed where the lawn had been scraped

away by the tussle of school children, then it opened up in a baseball field toward the ditch on the far side of a worn and spacious acre. There, on the other side of the yard, was a chain link fence meant to keep the kids out of the thick, brown water, but the fence had holes in it—and the holes were what saved us. Every other recess, cross-hatched rubber balls of varying size and air pressure but always the exact same red would soar over the fence into the thick branches of the willows along the ditch banks. A very hard or deliberate kick sent the ball all the way over both fences to the golf course that ran along the ditch's north side.

On the far side of that fence, old men in sleeveless, v-neck sweaters and plaid shirts would play through among the blue spruce and mountain ash of the seventh hole. The greens and fairways were well tended without being lush. The golfers gave off a reified happiness, an intent and complex serenity that was foreign to the schoolyard's barbarian melee. So foreign, sometimes a loose pack of third graders would stand there briefly, fingers curling on the links of the fence, to watch the old men pass, before the pack took off again, shrilly calling out for adventure, reinforcements, or an adversary.

One day, in the middle of the schoolyard's hue and cry one kid in the third grade stood stock still to watch the young Miss Jens as she came to school

for the first time. Her family had just moved into the mad, high house to the north of town. She was on her mother's elbow in her ratty clothes, the foof of her bangs like a ray of sun—blonder then—her skip-to-my-loo legs propelling her in always a new direction. Even then her fingers were light. The pencil in her hand just turned and turned. And as for that kid, that kid was me: the first time I saw her I had a feeling.

Recess followed recess, and it didn't hurt that she could run, because boys against girls required everybody to chase everybody else or try to block and if they ran you down, they had beaten you, and then we all switched sides. Out of everyone, Miss Jens had legs. I saw her go after a kid once with two other girls and she grabbed him and they tickled him half to death and he just laid there gasping on the ground like a wounded animal. *Wow*, my friend said, *she's fast*.

From that day on, Miss Jens was my pick for the Kissing Corner. Most kids didn't know much about kissing yet and if they did they didn't like it. When people kissed in the movies, we all covered each other's eyes, and groaned and shouted, *Is it over?!*, almost a parody of ourselves. Which is why the Corner—between the drinking fountain and the cupboards where we kept the glue—was really just for pretends, and the boys would hold the girls and the girls would scream and if kissing was out of the question altogether they would just hug. To the surprise and horror of the

entire third grade, I started getting in some smooches. Miss Jens blushed.

Now, I had been a bug on and off for several years before I met her. Each recess we would spread our wings and soar screeching across the playground, descending as locusts on some patch of grass, stuffing dirt and weeds in our mouths like starving circus animals that eat still knowing they are being watched. If we ate with gusto, it was to prove to the girls how glad we were to disgust them. Our faces smeared with dirt, dandelion leaves chinked in our teeth cracks, we would rise with a cry and suddenly—resembling less bugs than winged monkeys from Oz—soar off in search of new prey, less crowded pastures, giving the impression, at least, that we had something better to do.

Once I met Miss Jens, though, I didn't feel like eating dirt anymore. Another fantasy took hold. In an avalanche of daydreams, I became something more human. Each dream began with an abduction: The place and the hour varied, but usually a band of kidnappers dressed in black jumpers and ski masks would scale the porch on our house, loom briefly in the bedroom window, snatch me from my bed and hustle me back to a white van parked up the hill a ways. Sometimes they would hit Miss Jens's house afterwards, sometimes she was already gagged and trussed up against a tire well on the bed of the van when I was tossed in.

From there we were driven to their hide-out in

the woods and held in a small, stark room. Still tied up and gagged, we couldn't communicate except by the warmth and movement of our eyes—an ideal situation for two third graders incapable of small talk. The action would be drawn out in negotiations between the villains and local authorities, and punctuated by grisly threats to our parents, who, like Miss Jens and me, naturally grew closer during the abduction, and probably talked a lot more.

Each abduction peaked with a shoot-out, the woods crawling with federal agents on leave from the stack of comic books in my bedroom. In the heat of battle, during a lapse in our captors' guard, Miss Jens would free me, cutting through the cords with a rough-edged rock just loose on the floor. All we had to do then was make it out of the house and across the no-man's land (her speed guaranteed this) before we could be held as human shields in the kidnappers' getaway.

While fantasy is all fine and good, dreams run their course. I knew the kidnappers would never come and save us, and decided I had to act: In a jeweled box lined with purple velour, my mother kept her necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. Standing in the shadows of her bedroom while she was still at work, I found a thin gold ring with a rock on it, a delicate thing with hooks at the corners that I'd never seen her wear. Like any trespass—sneaking into the closet to poke at Christmas presents, reading your sister's diary—this one was too easy.

The next day during cleanup, I gave the ring to Miss Jens's friend Katie and told Katie to give it to Miss Jens, who took it and put it on her middle finger, where it didn't fit as loose as I thought it would. Later that afternoon, when we were putting on our coats to go, she stepped in front of me, which she never did, and said *Hey. I mean, thank you.* I swung on my backpack. The bell rang in the hall. So she said *Goodbye!* and so did I, to walk home kind of whistling, floating along with that backpack full of books, deaf to the shouts of kids playing dodgeball on the blacktop.

That evening while my mother was going crazy looking for her ring, her *engagement* ring, she whispered to herself, I didn't say a word. My little brother was by the TV, and so was I. I knew he thought she was mad at something he'd done, proly didn't even know what, so together, we both just played it cool. By nine o'clock, I thought, she might wear herself out, might even forget about it. We both got into our pj's and ready for bed. Then the Jenses called.

It was about their daughter's diamond ring—she said it had come from me. *Oh God O thank you thank goodness!* Mom said, and reached for the car keys. Left without a word and barely a glance at me. During the long minutes while she was out, I went upstairs to my room, slowly, and thought of nothing to do. The dresser, the bookshelves, the bedposts smirked under their reddish, yellowish stains. Dust rose from the carpet and

I coughed, for the next half hour shuffling dumb action figures around in the dark.

* * * * *

If I had to thank somebody, Victor would be it. Miss Jens and I met at his birthday party last May. The party was in a smoke-stained bar near the Seine—narrow at the front but flaring out in back, full of knotty pine, smudged brass, and dusty bottles lined up on the moldings—since Victor's apartment was too cramped, his friends too many for that sixth-floor *chambre de bonne* where he lived near Montparnasse. He was turning 30 just a couple months before me and that called for a celebration. Miss Jens walked in and sat down on the low stool next to me bright as a marigold, odd as herself (thinking back, I'm shocked there was a time I didn't know her yet), and we got acquainted.

"This is Miss Jens," Victor said, and smiled like he was handing me a prize, between us the sometimes solidarity of guys. "I don't think you two have met."

"You're the scientist, aren't you?" Miss Jens said.

"No. Why?"

"Oh, you look like a scientist, you know: the jaw, the brow," and her fingers made a study in the air to trace the jaw and brow, "Well, what do you do?"

"I'm a bird—a bird masseuse," I coughed and nodded, glancing up.

“Masseur,” Victor said, and flexed his hands. Miss Jens grimaced.

“Masseur yourself,” I said.

“I see,” she said, “and do you fly south for the winter?”

“Sometimes. For house calls.” (“And bird calls,” Victor again.) “How ‘bout you, what do you do?” I asked.

“Oh, I stay at home,” Miss Jens answered, and added gaily, “Don’t do anything at all,”

“I tried that once,” Victor said. “It was pretty hard.”

She shook her head. “Not more than anything else.”

“And what do you do ... when you’re not doing anything?” I asked.

“Well, I come to Realizations.”

“Such as?”

“Well the other day I found out what was Wrong with me.”

“Great!”

“But it’s not very fixable.”

“Ah—”

“But then again I’m not all that unhappy.”

“Well there you go,” Victor said, and took the carafe, “Here, have some wine,” and poured us both a glass.

“This is nice,” she looked around, “I’ve been

thinking I should get out more.”

On that note we stood, turning to other friends of Victor’s, and with a nonchalance that said *I’ll talk to you soon*, we mingled away from one another in the beery air and steady racket of the party. Didn’t speak again for the length of the evening. When she got up to go, though, I followed her out of the humid brawl at the back of the bar into the fresh May air, the cool attention of night.

“Do you mind?” I said. No reply.

So we began walking towards the nearest metro a few blocks away, soon riffing on the same nonsense in the same tone, not walking toward each other or away, just talking out ahead of ourselves like two people riding next to one another in a car, driver and passenger, our minds and mouths two spinning pairs of tires that would not touch or cross. The streets were lit a low sodium orange—shadows in the doorways, chic heels clackering here and there on curbs—each sidewalk a stage waiting for its actors while the audience files in and mills about.

When the conversation paused, the pauses were pregnant. A beginning. And as we walked I was lifted up, half-blind with that exquisite whisper, *She is all things good*. We were close to the metro when Miss Jens stopped. She smiled at the breeze blowing off the gardens that bloomed darkly in the shadow of a church downtown, their hedges exhaling an herblike, medicinal air.

“Do you smell that?” she asked.

I stood still then and breathed in—boxwood—glancing at her. Slender, light-eyed, slightly smiling, Miss Jens was radiant in the streetlights, and she had dyed her hair. Red, she had dyed it, red with blonde highlights. She wore a white shirt of light cotton and blue jeans and long boots. A living *tricolore*, latter-day Marianne. For it must be said: Everywhere that Miss Jens went she stood out. You could spot her across the room. In the street were certain men—attuned to a beauty more noble than mundane—who craned their heads as she passed. In bars since (I have seen it), strangers and drunks will walk up to her simply to say thanks for stopping by. *Merci*, they say, *merci*.

That first night I just saw her to the metro. At the entrance, limned with the fluorescent day that burned on underground, we paused. I gave her my phone number, and, not to be outdone, Miss Jens gave me hers. In her eyes were drawn the liquid ounces of my loss; pain fiddled and the future danced: *It would be better if you called me in three weeks*, she said, *I'm busy right now*. —What can you say to that? It's better than nothing, that's what. Any port in a storm, any molehill on the Russian plain of days.

Nevertheless, as I walked back through the orange-lit night to that bar near the Seine, I could feel the river water lapping, slow as life, at my sudden heart.

“Even a hint of hope,” Stendhal wrote, “is

enough for the birth of love.” Like toadstools after rain, like grassfires after a thunderstorm (racing over prairie, gutting ranches, charring fields), love is one of those natural phenomena whose immediate and overwhelming consequences seem to outweigh the cause. Yet basic science dictates that however implausible the origins of a feeling may be, our judgment of its truth must stand or fall on what is manifest among lovers, rather than those eternal criteria dear to the skeptic or the fool. Well, reader, here is the toadstool army, here are the barns of ash.

Month in month out all through the summer I pursued her, until she finally broke down and agreed to meet again. I called and called, wrote and wrote regularly—careful not to do so more than once a week. She wasn't hostile, but for reasons only Miss Jens can know, she kept me at arm's length. Sometimes I think she even forgot my name. Perhaps, even then, she sensed that something wasn't right. But the heat of the season waxed, then waned again with fall, and so did her distance. Don't think I had a choice: I tried with other women, but it did no good; they meant little to me; one evening with Miss Jens had ruined the rest. By my calculations, I've obsessed over Miss Jens about two months for every one we've loved—with such balance sheets, how can I come out ahead? How often do these obsessions bear fruit? And with what tools, if any, can we bring them to fruition?

A certain solid understanding that love is nothing more than the promise of loss is essential to that exercise known as the love letter. For the love letter, *billet doux*, that sweet ticket to another's heart, presumes at first a distance. Then, at a second stage, with the clumsy trestle of words the letter tries to span that distance, peering all the while at the cleft below, which yawns between two wills and their disparate intentions. Loss, that state from which love miraculously emerges and which it must stave off with each successive reinvention of feeling, is a canyon echoing with the letters' songs.

Now if this is true for love letters, it is ten times truer for verse, poems intoxicated with late nights dreaming on the rails, crossing countries that pass by in shadow, yearning for this woman whom you know to be alone. That was my case. For I was forced to travel, and had to court Miss Jens from afar. Work had sent me from city to city by train; my thoughts remained with her.

After weeks of torment, after dozens of nights running one or two lines over and over through my mind until they finally were sound, the poem that had tyrannized me assumed its terminal form:

hand in hand on the dimpled street
our swollen, dogworn eyes did meet;
our winking, nightbird eyes did jive

on dimpled street, on humid drive.

and i was a silver platter
and she was the claire de lune,
then i was an ocean liner
and she was the fey typhoon,
raining herself upon me
to a drumbly tumbly tune.

above she flees above she flies,
a nightbird with her nightbird eyes;
her wingbeat tells me just to wait
but not too long but not too late.

for time is a gravelly song
and singing an expectation,
decked out in ballads long
on heavenly gyration
that tell of my claire de lune
and her distant castigation.

“not yet!” the words are like a hell!
because, asunder, dry's the well
and long's the road; because, in part,
this waiting's a punishing, dry art.

now nights are drowned with a fervid croon,
now days are blind and bleary.

from looking for my claire de lune
 my dimpled eyes are dreary.
 for the moon is a softer sun
 whose home is fey and far
 from the gelid grass and frozen ground
 of earth, whose light you are.

A love letter, a poem: It aches to be written and aches to be sent, it overflows the brims. And once it has been sent, the aching becomes one of expectation. With what eyes will it be read? How will it be taken?

But already that was too far ahead. Before anything else, I had to decide whether to send it. By then, Miss Jens and I hadn't even kissed—we hadn't even seen each other a second time! Nor was it clear, if we did meet, whether or not that would actually be a "date." And yet the poem sat there on my desk like a chunk of my own flesh, loud and red. Whatever existed between us was germinating, and I tried not to kill it with an excess of emotion, so those feelings stayed pent up inside, flying on their trapezes before an audience of one while I planned the next step.

* * * * *

When mine uncle come with the clinkend money,
 we up and hit the road to beaches so as to swindle his
 contrition, flooze a little, and inflate my years. One of
 the world's favorite people, mine uncle, he'd weekly sent

me letters, for ideas grew out of his head, outstralling
 inspiteof a baseball cap that read CATERPILLAR.
 For example: "Let's drive the fifteen hours," he said, "to
 the pied cities that march on amber ocean and we'll see
 what women do there when we whistle." — "But in the
 garage is a whole animal," I said, "elksteak for months,
 and why not butcher the poor thing now while it's still
 light?" — "You suffer from excessive diction," he told
 me, "and you're chicken." So we quit the mountains, the
 carcass, my grandparents and my mother, who received
 a note.

Aboard the stinkhole Buick, amid his junk and
 leavings, mine uncle turns to me and says: "We are
 masters of time, son, not of space." (Coke cans rolling
 by the pedals, deep and mingled strata of hamburger
 wrappers and receipts across the backseat, a tennis
 racket, a television, a smell leaking from the trunk.)
 Fast as a bomb through stillness and the highway flying
 underneath I 'maged to myself that high city 'mongst
 the clean clouds in a movable light where mine uncle
 might be king and dignified, time crouched at his feet.
 And so our flight wound roadlong up one river and left
 it, ascending steep valleys onto thin plateaus and farm
 acres before finally curling down the far gorge so like
 salvages we could fall on some town or other where the
 freeway knotted and then hurried on.

Hardly time for truckstops. Beside us birds the
 color of dirt flew like dirt clods through the air above

aspen and stands of pine, sparrows and starlings arching forward on invisible wires like we were, sagging and swinging up again, as though the air and road were both traversed by swells themselves longrolling. Then on that straight fleet cruisesome fleeway high in the afternoon a heat dream shimmered forth on the shoulder, tripping up the traffic with her thumb and wearing a man's shirt, all elephants and mr. Ts, so I yelled STOP! whereon mine uncle did.

She ran to catch up with the car, then looked us over,

—Howdy, I said.

—Hi, the girl.

—Where to!?! mine uncle kind of yelled.

—Seattle. What about you?!

—We're going to Humboldt, I said, then Frisco.

—My alma mater—hop in! mine uncle yelled, which she did: climbed into the backseat with her bag where I'd cleared a spot, wrinkled her nose. Don't see a lotta you gals on the freeway! he said.

—Oh yeah? We just don't have to wait as long for rides.

—Bet you meet some weirdos!

—Hitch-hiking, she said, has restored my faith in people. Plus I have a knife.

—That's what I mean! mine uncle said. I looked at him, turned:

—Where you comin' from?

—Back east, New York.

—New York? mine uncle. Everybody's got a mouth!

And the car did us the favor of saving the conversation even if we didn't have something to say every second, and the counties unfurled.

—Isn't it funny, Miss Jens said, how your handwriting changes? (Quiet.) Today, for some reason, mine was round like a girl's.

—Like a girl's what? mine uncle asked.

—Like a girl's butt, she said, if she had a hundred butts. In a row.

—But you are a girl, I said.

—What does *that* have to do with it? she said, and laughed to herself.

Day wore on but easy while Miss Jens watched it pass, her hair covered with highway, eyes full of illusions, skin shiny with a silken grain, which seemed to sharpen my mind. The backseat smelled of old oranges and the sun was shining like it might teach us how to speak while dusk crept on its belly through the timberlands. A wind so cold it was clean and to roll down the window was clean and my lungs filled up with the whole joyful obligation of air. —How long could it take, mine uncle said, til we spilled out and scoured the country for a while? Show me a grief that doesn't deserve a wandering!

A moon, the mountains, Buick—Miss Jens

dozing on and off. Viscous skiffs of snow flashing through a dark city of trees while mine uncle, to keep himself awake, fiddled with radio and muttered, waving his hands, of a trek through Mexico and of the Amazons before the Spanish won, and the volleyball champions of nubile Tehuantepec who reign on even now, and how one summer he had lingered where the night was put to rest and the sea slept foglit by the watersides, dreaming he heard heels rapping on flagstones with an insolence that in the evening boded well. Those sweet faces armed him round and beat down his alonehood and go figger it didn't fight at all. —“We are not here for the world to sicken us,” mine uncle said, looked at me, and winked.

But I was looking at his forearms covered with minuscule tattoos, and my notice caught his notice and he started into his old story about how, back when he was broke but tatooloving, which used to happen late at night on the weekend, he would stop by a place he knew to see what they could do for a dollar and twenty-five cents (which went a lot farther then), and in their kindness they had drawn him all these little flowers and grimacing insignia that billowed up from the knuckles like the bored erratic scribbles of a ninth-grade notebook, in which he claimed he could read at least a chapter of his life.

In that moment at a crossroads west of Idaho, a hundred yards away, a signboard flew up—LUCKY

LIL's—and with a “Maarrvelus!” from mine uncle the car careened, its front wheels crunching over the curb of the lot as we skidded and raked through gravel and dirt up to the bare, used and dimlit porch where a herd of trucks were nosing. Miss Jens jerked awake. —“Keep your head up,” he told us, “and have fun. They're not going to card here.” So we unfolded from the car, and as I came round the front I thought the wheels looked wackled.

Then this bar walked in, beer moldering on its breath over layers of decayed piss and abused varnish, its walls jumped up with curling posters, its jukebox bragging an extinct species of rock and the local boys roud and lowdy. Momentous entry as the bar hugged us and we dazzled before a tiny stage lit with blue and yellow lights playing over some genial drunks, who jammed there by themselves while the tables whispered their appreciation and ridicule or ignored them in the hinter nooks. Three wanton beers from the bartender, at which point mine uncle presented himself to a woman named Candy, who was pretty once and single enough it seemed.

—Lotta people in here, Miss Jens said.

—Too many, I said.

—Middle of nowhere, too.

—Nowhere to go. . . ., I said. She nodded, set her bag against a barstool.

A silence brushed us then, whispered *Intimate strangers, you will part*. Miss Jens looked over the crowd.

—Isn't funny how you die? she said. That's what I've been wondering about . . . *pondering*. She looks at me with what seems to be an established expression.

—Death is funny, for sure.

—And all this. . . .

—Gone, I said, thinking how we had just got there.

— . . . is so fragile. Like my dream just now, she goes, where I flushed my body down the toilet.

—Just pooped it out?

—Like a baby. Only it was me.

—So what was left?

—Well, your body's a lot smaller when you take it off. Like clothes.

I looked at her and for a second thought she was a ghost. Miss Jens wasn't tethered very tight to this place. She looked at me again. —How long do you think you'll be on the road?

—Kinda depends, I said, a nod toward mine uncle in mid-carouse (or was he gesticulating?, or wrestling standing up?). Coupla weeks?

—Do you think a swing north on the way back?

—Dunno, I said, becoming afraid for mine uncle, around whom a scuffle widened like an oil slick, but jerkier.

—Well you should —*Kid!* mine uncle yelled *Christ! Hey now!* as he was being grappled toward the door by two thick men, a couple friends of Candy's by

the looks. Uncle gathering speed.

—Know how to fight?

—He just wants you to go, not t'fight.

—Right. You comin' with?

— I need a ride north, she smiled, hand on my arm. I won't be here long. Tell him thanks.

So I left because I had to and that's how I saw her when I saw her last, running out after a battered uncle into that orange-lit parking lot, barren as phone calls, where his hat was on the ground and he was explaining to the gentlemen that it had been Candy's idea and he hated to dance and anyway it was none of their business what kind of steps he knew. Made sense to me, but I didn't matter; they walked back inside, but not before one spit. We stood quiet in the dust, a thousand stars staring down like fish eyes in a flood, and mine uncle's own flushed face, burned gaze fixed on the porch still, wanting from the bar what the bar wouldn't give. I got in the car.

Leaving Lil's, the unperturbed Buick spat, turned, groaned and gained hopefully in speed until it swept humming through mountainous night, its hood ornament aimed toward rumoring cities somewhere. Mine uncle, bruised and alone in the light of the dash, had lost his gab. To myself I thought I'd be long time alone, and curled up by the window to mull. Dreams rose all around and I walked down their hollow road, that one song singing through my sleep.

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Despite setbacks, Miss Jens and I started talking on the phone more and more. Once I had returned to Paris, we began to go out. We met for coffee, then for wine; we went to a play, then a movie; one imperceptible thing led to another. The real turning point, if there was one, came about two weeks after. According to my journal entry from October 27th, this is how it went:

j was leaving, and already in the lobby, when I pulled myself together and told her i wanted to kiss her. “i want to kiss you,” i said. discussion ensued.

kiss begins. time dilates. kiss ends.

says she’s light-headed and leans against the wall. says she might need a glass of water. between the first and second floors, she collapses, a nose dive, i barely catch her. she’s on her knees, yellow as wax, her head lolling against me.

four floors pass and i’m shouting her name. finally we get the elevator open and on stop. i pull j to her feet and she’s coming back to lucid. in the apt she sits down heavy on the couch. i get the water,

the oj, an avocado, salt. “don’t think it’s your kiss. that’s happened to me before.”

a pale-faced hour goes by. she wants to go home but can’t walk straight. “nothing has to happen,” i say, “leave whenever you want.”

so we don’t sleep. barely even touch. a long time talking and laying there restless. get up, take out the clock batteries, go back to bed.

at five, insomnia. my one pillow given to j. she shared it at the end. that’s when i told her i had a poem.

“sort of rhyming couplets,” i said.

“i want to hear it,” she says. i recite it to her.

“that’s good,” she says, “i’m kind of shocked.”

“i meant to send it weeks ago.”

“i’m glad you didn’t.”

we eat some breakfast and she’s about to go. says she doesn’t know how she feels. leaving today for england. back sunday.

so, with a deeper knowledge of one another, a deeper uncertainty.

Shortly after the fainting episode, a period of long talking began. It was a new species of intimacy: every night just yap yap yap. You can imagine what followed. We couldn't sleep, I didn't rest, Miss Jens would colonize my mind.

Often in the act of love as Miss Jens rose above me, sculpted as an antique Venus and her hair in disarray, I perceived that we were of one flesh. And we attained a mystic union parallel to the carnal. United, I knew her and she knew me in some essential way, and we knew something beyond either one of us by virtue of that union. The whole issue of mind control or osmosis aside, I felt we were in synch. Even now, now that we're "taking a break," I will be thinking of her at the same moment that an e-mail from her arrives. Even though Miss Jens is of two minds about me, we remain one.

Can you blame me if I spent every minute with her last fall? I look back and see the precious hours as proof that this everyday existence is not our only life, that we are not limited to the quotidian, that a sister life and sister soul await. The air thickens, nights, heady with low laughter and the scent of limbs. It was that second of all our double lives, the one that sidles up to wink at the workaday, that gave me meaning during the months I was with Miss Jens. As I rode the metro to her apartment, I told myself, *I am on the way to my love's*. As it would emerge from underground, the aerial line, I saw the leaves fan quick and shimmering, the buildings

whose every line, balcony, roof was dutiful and right. Life, so long derailed, had recovered its promise and a plot.

At a no-name concert early in the winter, leaning against a rail inside some pub near Pigalle, I watched sparse couples stumble and entwine on the dark floor, almost despite the band that strummed and hollered loud and lost through Jimmy Buffet covers. While Miss Jens went searching for a bathroom, my ears wandered and I forgot the music, looked around. An old guy up front with gleaming pate had two women dancing: one after another, he would lift an arm and one sweetheart would cross under, laughing; they had lost the beat but didn't care. He wore his paunch so natural I could not imagine him without.

So I was admiring that belly, wondering if I'd get a gut like that someday, when Miss Jens slipped up and hugged me from behind, folding her arms across my ribs and resting her head high on my back. Cheek on shoulder blade, hair on my nape. Her warmth. Froze me. I looked for the old man, but couldn't see him. The music, galumphing and awry, confused with the blood in my ears. Because for years you wait for that touch, you wait so long your body forgets what it means, and then with a girl one night you come home. Like a river in you starts rushing deep and fast back to the place it used to know. So I turned to Miss Jens, took her hands, and we joined the other couples on the floor.

The next day Victor called. I'd dropped out ever since Miss Jens and I had started dating.

"So what's the news with Miss Jens?"

"It's babies forever," I said, "we'll be announcing the wedding soon."

"Oh yeah? Does she know that?"

"I haven't told her, but we have a kind of unspoken understanding."

"How unspoken is it?"

"Pretty unspoken. Don't mention anything to her," I said. "But I can tell by the little things, like the way she nuzzles."

"My God! I'm so jealous!"

"No no, don't be. Love's got its downsides. Makes you talk crazy, for one. Everything else goes out the window."

It was like that. Week after week inexhaustibly I slipped deeper in. All our roller coaster happiness, happiness so sudden and strong it feels like a grief the way it splatters in the chest, began to rattle the rest of my life. Take the office, for example: a dead-end job, maybe illegal, definitely shady, run by a psychopath. And there I was, like a congenital idiot, half-smiling at my desk till noon. The happier I felt, the less I could concentrate. In the morning I'd show up unshaved, unwashed, unfed and out of breath from the mad dash between her place and work, but somehow shining.

"What's so funny?" my boss said.

"Oh, nothing," hanging up my coat. Telling glance from co-worker.

"Trouble waking up?"

"My alarm never went off — was there a blackout last night?"

Still, I'd prefer to be fired for loving well than for almost any other reason. Sometimes you're faced with choices like that; it's time to go and love will do the trick.

The situation at the office naturally grew worse: I was wearing my spare shirt too much, the one that lived in my brief case for days when I came running from chez Jens. Three or four times a week like that! You'll understand if sometimes I stank. I knew it beyond all doubt because my boss, my immediate superior, would start coughing whenever I passed her desk. She had a very sensitive nose. I knew she was probably talking about me the way she talked about everyone else. *Can you smell her? Agh, what perfume is that?* she'll ask whenever a certain colleague leaves the room. *Can you smell him?* she's probably saying even now. But listen to me and I'll tell you something: that stink was the smell of a man in love.

Life barreled along carefree and flushed for most of November and December—the love, the stink, the coughing—and then I went home for the holidays. I had been letting things slide with a full heart and clear eyes and lo, vacation came, sent me packing for ten days

or so, and gave me the space to reflect a little on the state of my life.

Now Christmas is a carnival at my parents' home, a booming Montana reunion which, in its chaos, is situated somewhere between a cross-town football game and a war of the worlds. There is too much food, too much noise, too little space, and a spirit of rumbling inclusion and activity that succeeds for a week at least in making all of us—aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, grandmothers and cousins—a family again. Nonetheless, I had found a little time for myself and was thinking about my life with few regrets when the phone rang. It was Miss Jens, calling me from across the ocean.

"I've been thinking," Miss Jens said, "I need a break. I'd like to take a month off. Maybe we could see each other a little less in January."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "I was thinking we could just not talk," and she laughed that curt giggle of hers which indicates how much she feels this to be desirable as well as true. A giggle of embarrassed sincerity, an appeal.

"I'm glad we have a couple more days to discuss this," I said, as it was still the last week of December. In situations like this I stall and think, "Avoid big decisions long-distance."

"Why don't we talk about it more when I get back?" I proposed, hoping to somehow put the idea on

hold and freeze her heart before it drifted too far.

"Well," she said, "I would like to see you when you get back . . . perhaps one evening."

The signs, of course, had been everywhere.

As far as Miss Jens was concerned, commitment called for a modal verb, an arm's-length if and when. Discussing our couple in the future tense required that we shift into the realm of the probable, or improbable, rather. Despite the joy and playfulness, the tenderness and care that looked like they might carry us past those two high-flying months, we had trouble making long-term plans.

Example 1: The Conditional. Once she said *If we're still hanging out in a little while, we should go to Rome together.* Hanging out in a little while—our couple. Or another time: *When your parents come next spring, if we're still talking, I'd love to meet them.*

Example 2: Pet Names. We never called each other girlfriend and boyfriend—titles and everything they implied were out. If we ran into someone on the street, I simply introduced her as Miss Jens; if pressed, later, I might say we were "an item." Only in my thoughts did I call her *beloved*, talking to her aloud I would say *my little malady*, or *my petite disease*, because I felt it calmed her and gave the necessary space. For her part, Miss Jens referred to me as The Pain, or Such a Distraction, and I knew why: I was at her place six nights a week. By invitation.

Example 3: Opposites. Suffocated by my constant being there and her constant wanting that, Miss Jens would try to pull herself away. Handing me a cup of coffee in the morning, she might say, *Please, just tell me I'll never see you again. —What if I came back in a year? —Make it two, and don't forget your keys.* Or sometimes late at night if she was tossing in her sleep, I'd crawl over and whisper in her ear, *It's over. We're through,* just to reassure. We said our goodbyes every morning like they were the last words we'd ever speak. Breaking up several times a week was the only way we had to say *I love you.*

If I left through irony's door, I came crawling back in through absurdity's window. *Parting is such sweet fun,* I wrote her once, *let's do it again.* And she wrote back: *If I could just leave you everyday forever and ever, that would be enough.* Or imagine we'd made love and were just sitting in bed. Like a heroine doomed in matters of the heart, Miss Jens would toss her hair and say: *I don't expect you to wait for me.* So I said I wouldn't. Then proposed that we not wait for her together. Her eyes brightened, and she kissed me.

Everything was topsy-turvy, but it somehow renewed me; that is, it renewed me until Christmas. Since I met Miss Jens, I've experienced a rebirth of sorts, reborn down a rabbit hole in a Wonderland all her own. It seems she doesn't feel the same, though, so I'm going to ask what exactly I mean to her, and

why this sudden distance, just as soon as Christmas is through.

* * * * *

Melân cholé, black bile—that humor which, in excess, renders one pensive and withdrawn. An academic's disease. Prozac and its derivatives may stalk America on happy feet, but they go no further towards purging our poison than the theories of Hippocrates. Such contemporary *ten-den-cies* amount to a chemical reëducation, a contingent, punctual remedy of symptoms while our discontent abides. For cause, as Kant argued, is fundamentally mysterious. We are subject to wider determinations. And to locate the deepest causes of that morass called the mind in the serotonin reuptake inhibitors of its synapses is too mechanical and complacent an enterprise. One says neurotransmitters, another says neuroses, I say All of History. Put another way: Is melancholy a disorder of the individual in time or a disorder of the world? And if it were the latter, what would they prescribe?

Yet I digress before I begin. What can I tell you about my dear Miss Jens? She was fresh off the boat when I saw her high in the amphitheater on the first day of 20th-century French literature. She did not figure on the rolls, so I approached her after class to enquire as to her presence. She said she would be an auditor. Who

was I to refuse?

I had been working on the book for several years when I met her: it was to be a treatise on melancholy, a sequel to Burton's *Anatomy* examining the biles that beset our age. The idea came to me as my wife was dying—a work exploring heartache and human ordeal amid mail-order brides, cellphones, spam, the technicization of society, the mechanisms of propaganda, violence, guilt and alienation which coöpt us at every turn. To abstract me from the sufferings. Like most such undertakings, it remains unfinished, due to both the grandeur of its predecessor and the quagmire of its subject matter, rendered all the more acute, I'll acknowledge, by my special auditor.

She resembled a young Bergman—dark eyes, small mouth, long neck—though her nose was more aquiline and Roman. If you have ever seen Ingrid in Cukor's *Gaslight*, then you have a fair notion of Miss Jens, for she is determined and limited by her fear. A creature given to sudden moods, gazing at you one moment as though you were her salvation, the next like a frightened animal frozen in your sights. Keeping this always in mind, I undertook her education.

Miss Jens had a penchant for languages, and with a little guidance after class she was soon reading her assignments in the original. We read Gary's *Clair de femme* aloud, a simple exercise in enunciation. After a month of those sessions, she started coming all dolled

up, dressed in a series of 1950s get-ups. I would see her and sense my professorial persona begin to crumble—a larger economy of feeling opened up. Once she arrived looking like Marilyn Monroe, in a turquoise skirt and her hair bobbed just so, bubbly and coquette, as though she thought to inscribe herself in my own boyhood. Indeed, for moments, I wanted to dance. Epiphenomena of a tease, she stopped reading half way through the book, complained of boredom. So what do you think I did?

I told her to sit down and get to work. Miss Jens, lovely creature, was also frivolous and forgetful. When she wanted to be. So sunny when she smiles, her cheeks bunch up just like Bergman's did accepting those Swedish honors, standing near Rossellini in the dinner hall at Berns. (NB. Pronounced "Berryman." Like the poet. Americans put a "burg" in it in every sense, for we are without culture or the possibility of it.) I sought to correct this happy illiteracy in Miss Jens, at least. And yet her very sunniness would distract me from the task at hand: the thorough restructuring of her intellect.

Acedia, desidia, luxuria—sloth—a deadly sin whose condemnation saw a vogue in the late Middle Ages among engravers such as Dürer, Dinckmut, Bosch. To call it laziness would be to mistake its wider applications, notably in the domain of melancholy and its depths. I do not accuse Miss Jens of *acedia*, no, but rather myself. In regards to my work I was lax, both in

Miss Jens's instruction and my writing. The chapters of the new *Anatomy* slumbered in grubby sheaves, moldered in boxes, overspilled their files until they were unapproachable, impossible to think of. Thus it was *I* who sinned in my way, for I lost control. Miss Jens was no help.

Had she not been so frivolous, so forgetful, we might have made more progress that first semester, but I did not fully apprehend her alterity. I neither understood nor could I articulate it. Nonetheless, she enrolled in my courses one after another, following them as assiduously as she could for the next four years. And if she had just stayed a little longer, I might have grasped her, convinced her to devote herself to a life of thought. Instead, I saw her traipsing across the greens after class, admirers in tow, to be regaled with attention and anecdotes in those horrid cafés near the square. I knew her carefree ways, and felt the twinge of the Pisan judge, his *moglie* stolen and seduced.

Miss Jens *had need* of melancholy. That much was clear. Contrary to popular chatter, the black bile is not an emotion, and even less is it a disease. It is a mode of being, a way to go and meet the world, a way to flee it. I would hazard that it is the precondition of a philosophic disposition, which is by far the most noble, the most correct, the only possible bulwark against that which awaits us as human beings thrown into the world.

To begin, I instructed Miss Jens to pronounce words properly, in English as in French. If she had trouble with the gender of nouns, it is because she did not care enough to learn. The world, I said, is a hard place, and it is harder when one thinks. Yet you *must* think. I endeavored, at length, to teach her the dry and circular art of thought, knowing that once she graduated she would need me, a stern provider, even more—for how was she to learn? She was not made for this world; she does not appreciate it.

Which is why I proposed. We would live in supplementarity, I said, not short-circuiting our differences, but building a new ethics out of their collision. Her feelings would develop and complexify with time; there would always be a “between” between us; she would have her freedom. I believe I made that clear by the end.

So three days after Miss Jens received her degree, we were engaged to be married, and to her parents' delight. “With an endowed chair!” her mother said. In her father, I sensed the understanding that there was no one who would be more indulgent of her foibles than I. Her whole life was ahead of her: Latin, Greek, Europe, an assistantship, peer-reviewed journals—in a word, philosophy.

Yet six months later (one week before our wedding), she was gone. Of course I know why, and I am not bitter. We may have a relation of nonrelation now,

but I expect she'll be back someday, knocking on my door for counsel as she used to, asking for a translation of this or that. She was simply too young, too irresponsible, to spend her whole life with me, she said. She wanted to have "fun," and I could not dissuade her.

* * * * *

It should come as no obsession—excuse me—it should come as no *surprise*, my obsession. By now you know me. You see this imbalance of desire, mine outweighing hers. Since Christmas it has only gotten worse. Either Miss Jens does not know how to love, which I doubt, or she does not care to, which I fear.

The first three weeks of the new year have been a wash. Lethargy . . . I haven't been able to get out of bed. Day is just a grayer form of night. In love, but lazy, I am a bear half hibernating in this den of a studio on the square east side of Paris, where every morning the whole room is coated in a gray light that says: *Don't bother. Don't get up. Just go back to sleep.* Before me a year of mornings, as inexorable as a bowel movement, where I'll wake up and the first thought will be, *I'm going to die one of these days.* And the second will be, *What's the meaning of my life?* And the third will be, *You didn't used to think these thoughts.*

The fact of the matter—but how to separate bitter fact from bitter feeling?—is that I returned on

January 2nd and have hardly seen Miss Jens since. We met three times (—three!), and I haven't been able to get a straight answer out of her about why we don't talk any more. She shudders at the word couple. Still, she does call once in a while. "How are you?" she'll ask. We're probably talking more than we should be if we're not supposed to be talking at all, but even the chatter has died down.

And what can I think? In the wake of our last year's love is a lone water skier who has lost his life jacket and his skis but somehow remains afloat. He floats without sinking. Hangs on for dear life. But the strangest thing is, the tow rope isn't even there to grab onto. He's holding onto nothing and yet he stays there in our wake, close enough to wave to us. This is love once love is gone.

When I first got back, I knew enough to at least check in with Victor. He and I have known each other for years. I owed him Miss Jens, among many other things, and I needed to talk. And Victor is, by all indications, a genius. The only thing that impedes his brilliance is his worry: he worries too much, the smallest things perturb him. Even he knows this, but that knowledge only gives him more to worry about. Last he told me, he'd decided to cure his anxiety with alcoholism—psychoanalysis, he said, was too expensive. I wholeheartedly supported that, considering his options.

As far as I know, Paris has two pool halls in the whole city, both of them on the Right Bank. One of them doubles as a tango ballroom, so it doesn't really count. That's where Victor and I were, in the pool hall that didn't count, him with a bottle of psychotherapy in each hand and me with the pool cue, when I told him about Miss Jens: that she hadn't called in days, that there was no end in sight, that I was despondent. We stood with our backs to the horseshoe bar, our faces sinister as Christmas, half red from the neon beer insignia on the walls, half green above the table's brightly lit felt. Carlos Gardel was crooning *Mi Buenos Aires querido* in the background as couples turned, squeezed and faltered on the dance floor to our left. Victor stood at the edge of the table and stared. Like a pool shark confronted with a shot he just can't sink, he muttered, "What can I tell you? S'not a good sign."

La ventanita de mis calles de arrabal, the tango ran, "By the way," Victor says, distracted, "have you heard about that disease people get where they don't know if they're hungry or not?"

donde sonrío una muchacha en flor

"No."

"Well I think I have that. I never know if I've had enough to eat. Sometimes I'll have dinner and I'll still be hungry so I keep eating and just make myself sick!"

quiero de nuevo hoy volver a contemplar

"You've got to be kidding."

aquellos ojos que acarician al mirar.

"No! And sometimes I'll go all day and not feel like eating anything at all and then I'll wake up starving in the middle of the night! What do you think I should do?"

En la cortada más maleva una canción

"I don't know . . . measure your food out, I guess. Figure out what you need and measure it. Doesn't the government have some kind of website?"

una promesa y un suspirar

"I don't know if I'd trust the government to tell me what I should eat."

borró una lágrima de pena aquel cantar.

"Really?"

"Do you honestly think they have our best interests in mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I—O.K., look, forget it. How about Weight Watchers? They should be able to tell you what a guy your size should be eating. They've got all the calories figured out."

Mi Buenos Aires querido,

"A guy my size! I'm five foot eight and I weigh 130 pounds! Less than that! Weight Watchers doesn't even register guys like me," he paused (*cuando yo te vuelva a ver*), "I don't know, I just don't know. Hey, want some peanuts?"

"No, I don't want some peanuts. I'm just thinking—"

no habrá más pena ni olvido.

“Yeah, me neither come to think of it. How bout some chocolate?”

“No, I don’t want chocolate. I was just thinking that Miss Jens. . . .”

“Hold that thought—I’m gonna go get us some chocolate. Be right back.”

If I haven’t called my love recently, haven’t bombarded her with letters like I used to, it’s because I’m tired of making a fool of myself. Victor says I should try to see her as much as possible now so as to tire of her more quickly, but I’m not up for it. Lack the will. Still, I’m beginning to wonder if that wasn’t Miss Jens’ very thinking last fall, inviting me over six nights a week; I wonder if it wasn’t her sabotage.

My grandmother, on the other hand, thinks I should play hard to get: *Women need to conquer, too*, she says. Of course everyone gives that advice and no one takes it. Who has the strength?

Sidenote: every time Miss Jens decides it’s time to be on her own again for a while, she makes a visit to the dentist. Last time her crowns, delicate things in the best of times, broke under the stress of the separation (she clenches her jaw to hold her tongue). This time it was a root canal. So during the very maybe month of January, against my better judgment, I sent Miss Jens this note:

You get cavities for company and tedium for tea,
and doubt has come to dinner bearing glad’s
apologies.

Lonesome in the evenings, did you ever second
guess
the thoughts that made you think that we should
see each other less?

Next day, she responded:

Cavities for company—the most delightful
guests!

I cannot chew or drink hot tea or bite an apple
lest

The most delightful pains go shooting round
about my mandible.

Honeypie, I had it coming. Your sweets made me
a cannibal!

Indeed, Miss Jens is a man-eater, but of the most delightful sort. Like her, I too practice a kind of cannibalism, of which this chronicle is the proof. Sometimes you eat your love and sometimes your love eats you.

If I bring up that snippet of correspondence, however, it is to drive home another point: Miss Jens charms me. She is most comfortable at play and least comfy in couples. In or out of love, however, her aim

is to please and to please absolutely, which invariably provokes a disastrous response in the object of her attentions: i.e. total infatuation, desire to possess, and finally rancor. Her crime, if she commits any crime at all, is one of excess.

Pursued by this surfeit of love, Miss Jens moves from place to place and from boyfriend to boyfriend, unable to escape herself or her admirers. She's looking and looking for respite somewhere. I hope she finds it—that's one of the few hopes I still cling to. Miss Jens is at once Io and that angry goddess, chasing herself through Greece to Egypt (the land of exodus serving suddenly as a refuge). In her particular case, refuge is perpetual exodus, for she is uncomfortable with her gods. And yet her gods, like all gods, will not release her. Nor will mine. Looking back, I see how they perfectly matched: mine being gods of loss, hers gods of departure.

The second night I spent with Miss Jens after we'd decided not to talk took a turn both painful and unforeseen. It was a night disguised as love, whose ulterior was only revealed to me by morning.

Perched on the second floor, Miss Jens's bedroom looks over a small street deep on the Left Bank. The bedroom has one window whose shades cut the walls with their striations as long as there is light. Outside: mold on the concrete, drear on the asphalt, the clamor and piss of drunks. Inside: a bed. So at the end of night,

a long shipwreck of inattention, Miss Jens rolled over and laid her body next to mine. The dawn had turned a deeper shade of blue as the sun crept round, and the stripes cut daintily across a drawing on her wall. Miss Jens and I lay drowsy and tense (what could it mean?) in a dark hollow of the bed, she on her belly and I on my back, when she turned to me and said, *Mother Nature plays tricks. She has a way of tricking you.*

That wasn't just to break the silence after sex. She meant that she hadn't intended to see me, but, *voilà*, couldn't help herself. *She tricks me into drinking lemonade, I say, when I'm hot.* But to myself I thought, *Miss Jens is using me for my body.* To formulate and admit that too often in the days that followed caused me a sorrow, so I tried to block it out. This inability on Miss Jens's part to either completely quit or completely join me has left me in ruins. What food is to Victor, I am to her: she's not sure how much of me she wants. In the back of my mind, though, where things do work out, I say to our phantom children: *Your mother was only after me for sex, but I made a decent woman out of her!*

A sop for loneliness, a body for lust—I'm willing to provide those services as long as there is love, for the feeling transforms the act. We cannot hurry lovemaking, or shrink away from one another after, without doing some quiet wrong. We cannot gaze with cold eyes on the beloved without him ceasing to be. The stone light I see in Miss Jens' gaze tells me that I am no

longer—in those days during Christmas, she somehow routed me from her mind—the defeat, unbeknownst to me, was total. A desirable outsider, at best. Since I have realized that, of course, we rarely succeed in bed. I am not responsive—for impotence is simply the man’s way of saying, *I don’t like this anymore*. Sterility does the job, too, but takes longer.

When I mentioned to Victor how Miss Jens was using me for sex, he didn’t believe. *Bullshit!!* he shouted, spilling his beer. I said women were human, after all, and people had needs. So Victor asked, *Well, what if you were just using her for love?* A good point. I no longer knew whether I had loved Miss Jens or a phantom; our pre-Christmas romance seemed unreal. Already the spirit was moving on.

Speculations aside, every time we met ever since I began to love Miss Jens, I thought it would be the last time we’d see each other. Finally I was right. The last time was when, after two attempts at sex without love and one without arousal, she came to my apartment to visit for half an hour. With her, a complaint:

Me: Want some coffee?

Miss Jens: I don’t think I have time.

Me: It’s already made.

Miss Jens: Oh, well, in that case—

Me: Sugar?

Miss Jens: Sugar? I’m not sure.

Me: . . . Well, if you did want sugar, how much would you want?

Miss Jens [laughing]: A little.

Me: All right, a little.

Miss Jens: I’m sorry, I haven’t been feeling very well. My throat’s hoarse.

Me [pouring the coffee]: Oh yeah? What is it do you think?

Miss Jens: The Vicissitudes.

Me: Ah! And what do you need for that?

Miss Jens: . . . More Vicissitudes!?

And were she not so gentle, with such a high and lilting voice, her laughter would have been properly described as desperate, maniacal even.

Time seemed to unravel then like a thread that had lost its spool. A doom unending as the Paris winter brooded over us in my Spartan room. I didn’t know what to do, so I handed her a mug and sat down on the couch. After a silence, she continued:

Miss Jens: The literature of the East has much to teach us, don’t you think?

Me: Oh, I think it’s been said, most of it.

Miss Jens: I’m talking about the other literatures of the East.

Me: I see.

Miss Jens: Yes. I’m thinking in particular of the

one that instructs us in the art of letting go, non-attachment.

Me: Have you been talking to your brother again?

Miss Jens: No, I've just been doing some reading and thinking of you.

Me: . . . Are you leaving me? Is this how Buddhists break up?

Miss Jens: I'm detaching now. I think I'm already detached.

Me: —

Miss Jens: Don't take it wrong. I'll be here if you want to talk. It's not like I'm walking out of your life. But I think I need to leave this couple dream for now.

In the weeks that followed, little transpired between us. We were grinding to a halt. By the time February rolled around, Miss Jens had decided to prolong our separation indefinitely, though she would occasionally break down and call, perhaps out of guilt, perhaps from genuine affection. I thought of those calls as her little gifts, gifts of atonement and farewell, a final

dose of the poison I adored. Her voice still echoed in me sweet as ever, but it was a voice of leaving.

If those weeks of deepening solitude have taught me one thing, it is this: passion knows no dénouement—only aftermaths. Jet trails disappearing among clouds. It was the end of the end.

Our chronicle spent, the will to write exhausted, I have nothing left to give you but two last notes. Again, taken from my journal:

February 12th

in with the odds and ends i sent back to j—a blouse, some stockings, a hairpin and a deodorant stick—was a note:

It's not that I'm not thinking of you, but that I don't want to be.

March 3rd

nothing reminds me of her like a phone call from her. she calls and my first feeling is joy, but that joy is followed by a hopelessness. i have asked her, politely, to stop.