summer, an old man in a tattered cloak, the waterseller, passes a brimming glass with a black fig in the bottom to a smartly dressed young boy. It’s a painting I’ve seen half a dozen times and always felt drawn to, but today I was almost shocked by its impact. Those two faces, staring so intently, but neither at each other nor at the water, their two hands, one old, one young, meeting on the stem of the glass, the light in the transparent liquid above the dark fullness of the near-invisible fig, they seemed to hold some obscure message for me.

I asked my brother if there was a story behind the painting. Who was the third guy in the shadow behind the seller and the boy? ‘Just a street scene,’ John said, ‘just a moment in Seville.’ He drew my attention to the water dribbling down the jug in the foreground and began to talk about the kind of paints Velázquez used. There were two other versions of the Water-seller, he said, one in the Uffizi and one in the States somewhere.
Street who put me on more or less permanent antibiotics and after something like a year I was cured.

‘I am cured! Completely cured! The booklet was wrong!’

I remember yelling those words to myself in delight and rage, time and again. ‘Wrong, wrong, wrong! The book was wrong!’ I wanted to find the author and stick his miserable prophesy right up where his prostate was. ‘What a hateful story, and not even true. He got it wrong. I’m cured! CURED!’

But was I?
Had I ever been?
‘Urine sample over there,’ the nurse said.

I turned and slotted my test tube into a rack with a community of other test tubes, thirty or forty of them, in orderly rows, cozy and indistinguishable as crosses in a war cemetery.

Perhaps my condition had simply been dormant. Or I was lying to myself. I had always been uncomfortable. Just that I was used to it, to a certain level of it. I had told myself the tale of being cured because it made me feel better. I so much wanted the booklet to be wrong. Wasn’t it strange, for example, that I had been unable to tell Carlo when these pains actually began?

‘Clench your fist,’ the nurse said. She smiled. ‘No need to look so worried.’
In a dream, a dark patch on the floor flew up in my face, closing its wings around my nose, mouth, eyes. A bird. A bat. Choking me. The floor was the floor of my father’s church as visited a month before by myself and my brother.

Would it help to know, I wondered, that my nervous father had suffered from the same condition? Had he? Were prostate problems hereditary? I remembered Mum making fun of him because, when she called him to meals, he always had to ‘slip away and spend a penny’ before coming to the table. He wanted to be comfortable. So perhaps Dad had had to go to the bathroom a lot at night too and I had known nothing about it. I should phone my mother, I decided, and get the story from her. As soon as I had confirmation that the condition was congenital, I would accept the situation, do the operation, and get it over with; though of course my father had never had such an operation, at least as far as I knew.

Could it be that it was precisely his worrying about a possible operation that brought on his cancer?

Certainly my father had been a worrisome, dissatisfied individual.
ors, abdominal transversals. These basic anatomical elements were nourished by a network of arteries and veins that likewise lent itself to two-dimensional representation and simple, quiz-like challenges. A day’s cramming guaranteed you eighty out of a hundred in the end-of-term biology exam.

But as the years passed and the diagrams grew more colored and intricate, accompanied by chemical formulas and names that were hard to spell, it became clear that only the most assiduous and determined among us had any chance of understanding this prodigious machine with its lymph nodes and cell structures, its proteins and mucous membranes. At no point were we invited to compare our own bodies with the diagrams we studied. Phenomenally complex it might be, but the body was still only a mechanism, an object of study. The body wasn’t us. Which was why it was fine, once you’d grasped the basics, to leave deeper understanding to the experts, the same way you do with cars and computers and central heating systems. Only
a handful of us would pursue biology beyond O level, the lowest level of British secondary school exams. If ever something were to go wrong with the body that you personally happened to be in, these were the people who would fix it for you.

My wife phoned me at the office to say the blood and urine results had arrived in the mail, and I went out on the river in my kayak. I refused to be anxious. In winter I use a light slalom kayak. Sometimes I paddle three bridges up the river and surf on a wave in the rapid by Ponte Pietra, the old Roman bridge. This inevitably becomes a form of exhibitionism. Tourists standing at the parapet take photos of the city. They point their cameras down at the surfing kayaker, no doubt wondering if you will hit a rock or capsize. They want a memorable snap. If you make the effort to force the boat up the rapid and under the bridge to the other side, they applaud when you climb the last rush. They aren’t discerning enough to appreciate that you are only a moderately competent paddler. Certainly they won’t be thinking you have a prostate problem.

Or I practise threading the slalom gates at the bridge near the club. There was a paddling move that obsessed me, had obsessed me for a long time, because although I knew perfectly well in my head how it worked, I could only rarely do it. One of the slalom gates is placed just inside the eddy that forms downstream of a bridge pillar. You have to pass from the main flow
to the milling eddy and turn the kayak so that it heads upstream through the gate. To do this efficiently you must drop the downstream thigh as you cross from stream to eddy while swiveling your trunk round and digging the paddle deep on the upstream side. If you get the coordination right, the tail of the boat slides down into the water of the eddy, the nose rears up, and the boat rotates on the spot. Well performed, it is an elegant, effortless move.

I never got the coordination right. Not true. I got it right sometimes; let’s say, just often enough to keep trying. But I never really learned it. My body got it, or didn’t get it, at random, as if it were a question of throwing six on a dice.

Why? I can ride a bicycle. I can ski. It seemed to be a problem with right–left coordination. I am very left-footed, and though I write with my right hand, I catch a ball with my left. Could I have been, in society’s general eagerness for conformity, a suppressed left-hander? Does the sort of tension generated by such suppression produce restless, worrisome, dissatisfied individuals who pester urologists? Why is the body such a mystery and why is the mind so frustrated in its dealings with it, as if faced with an equation that won’t come out? A situation not unlike the mind’s perplexity before some works of art. These are futile trains of thought. Yet I seem condemned to entertain them.
Teach Us to Sit Still

curious how one does these tests to establish firm facts yet still tries to get the best result. To cheat almost. Obviously there is something virile about a copious, vigorously splashing pee, and I did not want to seem too pathetic. It crossed my mind that pulling back the foreskin entirely, which compresses the urethra a little and intensifies the jet, might alter the results further in my favor. Then I reflected that this was like putting your thumb over the mouth of the garden hose to get the water to reach the bushes behind the flowerbed. The jet looks better and goes farther, but the flow rate is the same.

Standing in a curtained-off cubicle, then, I produced my melancholy, rather lengthy and intermittent pee into the white plastic funnel, while, at the other side of the room, a clever needle traced a tormented, broken-peaked zigzag onto a roll of moving graph paper. As soon as I had zipped up, the young, rather handsomely mustachioed doctor who was supervising tore off my Alpine-arc result and, by way of explanation, sketched over it the trajectory of a normal person: the line he drew showed a smooth pinnacle of healthy urinary performance.

Looking at the two curves, the one vertiginously graceful, the other stunted and stuttering, I was aware that the graphs
hold a mirror so she can gaze at her face; only, given that we see her face in the mirror, she wouldn’t have been seeing herself at all, but us, or rather Velázquez.

Both pictures, I thought, calling them up on Google, seemed to have to do with looking, with bodies and minds; and at the center of both, focusing our attention and tying our mental activity to that of the figures in the painting, were deceptive images of glass and transparency. Why were the boy and the waterseller looking neither at each other nor at the water, yet apparently communing through it?

I went back and forth between the paintings. The exchange of water would have been a commercial transaction—the waterseller sells—but it didn’t look commercial. It was rapt, or meditative, as Venus and her cherub were rapt. But the real question was: why had I—quite absurdly—started to think of the dark fig at the bottom of the glass as the prostate, the prostate in a state of perfect health, but only thus because beautifully submerged in that transparent, strangely mental water? The water was more beautiful because of the fig, and the fig was darkly perfect because of the water.
I get angry with myself when my mind meanders in this odd-ball fashion. This is the merest self-referential vagary, I muttered. Crotchgazing. Probably any picture would have set it off. You should give up writing books, I told myself, and accept straight journalistic commissions that would force you to think more purposefully.

On returning home, I opened a letter with the results of the so-called three-day urine cytology test and discovered that they had found precancerous cells in my bladder.
I was paying privately now. This *dottoressa* was the only person in Milan whose scans he and his colleagues trusted, Carlo had told me. She slid the scanner slowly across Vaseline on my stomach and I asked her if she saw a lot of cases like mine. ‘Sure, lots of guys your age. It’s standard stuff.’

She was in her midfifties, gray-haired, a small pouty mouth, pretty.

I asked her if she noticed similarities between the men she saw with these symptoms. She worked while we talked. Her right hand moved the instrument back and forth across my belly in sweeps, some fast, some slow, halting a moment, then off again, searching, intent; her eyes were focused away from me on a computer screen. The left hand tapped on a keyboard. She was concentrating. I could just glimpse phantom shapes in a dark turbulence on the screen.

‘Well, they are all *busy* people,’ she said. ‘It’s always difficult to make appointments. Now, if you could go and pass water, please.’

I went to the bathroom, peed and came back. She was clicking through images on the screen, making notes. ‘That was quick,’ she observed. ‘Quick?’ ‘Too quick. Go back and finish. I have to measure how well the bladder voids. It won’t be empty yet.’
be amused by how Italian all this was. The surgeon was the
best surgeon in Italy, the radiologist the best radiologist in
Europe. And by purest chance we were all the best of friends.

Let’s hope it was true.

The big gray x-ray plates were slid up onto the illuminated
viewing panels. It was rather eerie. My body had been reduced
to the two-dimensional black-and-white of the biology-book
illustration. I could study myself as a separate phenomenon.

Or I would have been able to, if they had given me time
enough to understand what I was looking at. No sooner had
he put up one plate than Stefan was taking it down again with
barely a glance. The surgeon wasn’t even looking, but reading
through the radiologist’s typed report. I wondered how much
detail the brilliant Stefan could be seeing. One image fol-
lowed another. Filled with contrast medium, the kidneys
floated up like white lilies in a weedy underwater of muscle
and bone.

“These next ones are where you’re passing water,” the sur-
geon said.

Now he was paying attention. The two men gazed at length
at five small plates, arranged one beside another; Stefan took a
pen to follow the line of the urethra in each.
professional help shows humility and good sense. But someone who makes his body ill because he doesn’t want to acknowledge his mind is in trouble, because he’s repressing his fears and desires and conflicts, is just a loser.

At exactly the moment I formulated this view, I realized that I was actually extremely eager for my problems to be psychosomatic. I was more than willing to countenance the idea that my pains only existed in my head, or that trouble in my head had brought them into existence in my body. I want to change, I told myself, returning from the bathroom. Why else would I have gone to an Ayurvedic doctor? I want everything to change, inside me.

The following morning I felt let down by the Taj Mahal with its determined whiteness and oppressive symmetry. It was too much the photos I had seen of it, enclosed and regimented and willful. But the view of the Yamuna from behind the Taj remains to this day one of the most powerful images I have of India. You lean on a parapet and look down. The river is a few hundred yards away, slowly meandering across a broad brown floodplain. Beyond, low hills stretch into emptiness. From left to right, nothing obstructs the eye as it follows the stream’s wintry drift through a sea of sand. The sun was hazily bright that day, and here and there spots of intense color marked where women were turning the soil for springtime. Very slowly, three camels forded the stream.
recovers, then bitterly regrets it. What betrayed him, he reflects, was the ‘subtle temptation of service’; he was too eager to serve his fellow men to allow himself to die.

I puzzled over this strange story as the plane made its steady journey west: almost every aspect of Gandhi’s relationship with his body became a means of imposing his will on others, yet he thought of himself as striving only for purity and universal love.

‘The carnal mind,’ he writes, ‘always lusts for delicacies and luxuries . . . Instead of controlling the senses, it becomes their slave.’

So he rules out sex with his wife from age thirty-seven; she must also renounce her jewelry.

‘I explained that it was always a good thing to join with others in any matter of self-denial.’

Accordingly, he doesn’t allow a desperately sick child to be given meat broth. He doesn’t allow his dying wife to be injected with antibiotics. Injections are impure. She dies.

Again and again, Gandhi uses the spectacle of his own self-starvation to force his political enemies onto the back foot. The experiments with truth in the book’s title often seem to involve searching for the most mortifying of diets, the one that will cause most concern in those around him. His enemies can’t hit
The Difficult Target

I was to meet my surgeon in the urology ward on the fifth floor, then proceed to the operating room for the cystoscopy. He was busy when I arrived, and to pass the time I studied a number of posters hung at intervals along the corridor advertising conferences. In each case, there was a title, a subtitle and an image to illustrate the topic. A crude cartoon of a dripping faucet represented the problem of female incontinence. More imaginatively, a conference on erectile dysfunction was advertised with Magritte’s painting *The Double Secret*: against the backdrop of a nondescript sea, part of a man’s face has been lifted off like a mask to reveal, inside the head, what seem to be bundles of bamboo with strangely split spherical joints. Evidently, male problems were more interesting than female, or sexual problems than urinary.
I was surprised by my own intensity.
‘Don’t worry!’ The man was amused but taken aback, as if it was extraordinary that I should care so much.

You strip and put on a long white nightshirt, then half sit, half lie, on something that looks like a birthing chair with a plastic bowl beneath your butt to gather the blood. Everywhere there are straps and buckles to hold the workpiece—you yourself—absolutely still so that radical things can be done to you. The thick smell of chemical cleanliness is one with gleaming surfaces and sharp tools. You surrender your body to their science.

I smiled and said hello to everyone.
‘Good morning, Signor Pax,’ someone said. ‘How are we feeling this morning?’

While the team was setting up the instruments, the surgeon asked me if I had heard that Carlo had discovered he had diabetes. It had happened while I was away in India. ‘Almost passed out in his car, came right away for tests and found his blood sugar was way over. Stratospheric.’

‘Given what he was eating . . . ’ I said.

One of the nurses was now strapping my feet into two large boot devices way up in the air and a good meter apart. There is always a part of me, at these moments, eager to rebel. Yet I never do. I imagine it is the same at executions.
‘In fact, they put him on a diet,’ the doctor chuckled rather lugubriously, taking his place between my feet. ‘No more doughnuts, I’m afraid.’ He had a mask over his face now and what looked like a plastic bag on his head. ‘Not to mention the medications.’

Then despite the situation I was in, with a nurse tying rubber round my forearm to inject the anesthetic, I said the real problem with Carlo was why did he feel the need to eat so much? There must be some sort of psycho problem if he couldn’t keep away from the sugar. Especially being a doctor and knowing the risks.

Pulling rubber gloves on those heavily veined hands, the surgeon shook his head. ‘Carluccio just loves his food’, he said.

A nurse lifted the white nightshirt to prepare the approach to the difficult target. I was aware of something long and metallic in the doctor’s hands, and at the same time I felt intensely concerned that this man who was about to push something hard and far too wide into the tip of my penis could not see the plain truth that our friend Carlo had serious problems.

‘If ever there was a case of physician heal thyself!’ I protested. ‘He’s always got something in his mouth. That can’t be—’

I passed out.

A curious thing about anesthetics is that when you come to, you have no sense of time having elapsed. With sleep, as I said, I know within ten minutes or so how long I’ve been unconscious. Here the film cut abruptly from feelings of anxiety, distrust and humiliation on the operating chair to the sound of
Palmetto (85% fatty acids & sterols) for about two weeks. I have noticed improvement within three days. I got the Saw Palmetto from Trader Joe’s for only $6.99 (100 tabs). This is about $15.00 cheaper than most other brands.

A man with his own site on prostate health directs you to the Aneros anal massage and sex toy.

It’s a must!

A woman writes in:

I am a prostate massage therapist who has been practising for over 9 years helping gentlemen who have prostate issues. Remember, just because the prostate is tucked away doesn’t mean it doesn’t need attention!

I wonder if ‘prostate issues’ was meant to be a joke. Sometimes a contributor doesn’t realize what kind of chat he’s in:

God knows why the male G spot was put up the arse but there we go, if it’s done correctly along with stimulation of the penis the orgasm is out of this world! Try it!
was too much. Now it’s a relic, with neither the cross on top nor the virile thrust it had before.

_Since the operation, I get a kind of tickle and fullness, but haven’t been able to achieve a proper . . ._

This is silly. Like when I started thinking of the waterseller’s fig as the prostate. Yet I notice that my mind is more at ease with these eccentric analogies than with the information onslaught of the Net. I have the impression they bring me closer to some truth about my condition, but in the way dreams do. Something important is staring you in the face, only you can’t decode it. It won’t come out in words. That’s the fascination of dreams. And certain paintings. There is truth that can’t be said, knowledge you can’t access or use. My mind wanders off in these enigmas, and after a while I find I’m feeling a little better. Is it a placebo effect? One day, I suppose, I will discover the meaning of Velázquez’s painting. Or maybe that would spoil it. It’s such a quiet pleasure, lying down with closed eyes, trying to recall that glass of clear water with its dark fig.

I sit up and look across the valley toward Verona. I’ve lived here, or within a few miles of here, for almost thirty years. Could it be, it comes to me, that Italy, Italian, is the acquired trait that clashes with my original English inheritance? Is this the long
daughter. The power of prayer did not transform her. Nor a trip to Lourdes. My father’s cancer was not healed by the laying on of hands. He lost his mind and died in pain. Afraid of anything that reminded us of their spiritual aberration, my brother and I counted entirely, perhaps aggressively, on official learning and official medicine; perhaps the only opinion we now had in common with my mother and sister was that all alternative therapies were baloney. Even today, if you mention acupuncture to my atheist brother, he will declare it hocus-pocus. Just like my mother.

So where was I to turn, now that I had washed my hands of the doctors and they of me? The previous week, at the university, I had had to interrupt a lesson; for the first time the pain had obtruded on my teaching. On Sunday afternoon at the stadium—for I was still an avid soccer-goer—I was barely able to sit down during the second half of the game. I had to keep jumping to my feet as if excited by what was going on on the field. ‘Arbitro di merda!’ I yelled, when nothing much was happening. My stadium friends laughed, but someone behind asked me to sit down.

On the bench in Regent’s Park, among the pleasant trees and lawns, I shouted: ‘Something’s got to change! Please!’ and a young man turned and glanced at me and hurried on.

That evening I went out with an old friend, drank heavily, talked about the two girlfriends he was playing off against each
life and that this explains his failure to make a career for himself in the Fascist bureaucracy. Eventually, his parents recall him to Catania; they have found a girl for him to marry. Antonio isn’t happy, he had wanted to choose his own bride. But Barbara is ravishing and he falls in love. To the chagrin of other hopefuls, the couple marry and go off to live together in the country.

Brought up by nuns, Barbara is as innocent as she is irresistible. It is a year before she realizes why the babies aren’t arriving. At last the scandal hits town: Antonio can’t get it up. The bride’s parents are outraged and demand an annulment. Antonio’s father is so ashamed he makes well-advertised visits to prostitutes to ‘save the family’s honor.’ The book is a brilliant comedy and, for any man, a disquieting reminder of just how much hangs on your sexual potency. Once the truth is out, Antonio can forget a political career. ‘He never had the stuff of a real Fascist,’ comments a local official. ‘My son is dead,’ his father declares.

But why does Antonio have this problem? It’s not that he has never had sex. There’s nothing physically wrong with him. Is it because the women who chase him are so predatory and
on vacation together. And I invented a few determinedly optimistic formulas to repeat . . .

I shall spare you the formulas. All I can say is that doing all this stuff at two in the morning and at three and again at four and certainly at five is no joke. You have to feel gung ho. To keep at it you’d need to get quick results. Unfortunately, the only effect it had on me was to wake me up to the point that I couldn’t easily get back to sleep. Lying in bed, I wondered whether David hadn’t exaggerated the positive effects of EFT because he liked having his friend’s wife hanging out in the bathroom with him, the sound of those faucets covering any hanky-panky they might have got up to. Impotence was not among David’s listed symptoms.

On the last pages of *Il bell’Antonio*, after Catania has been bombed and Fascism overthrown, Antonio gets his libido back. Sort of. Outraged by the news that Barbara has married an aging but wealthy rake, he imagines giving her a good thrashing. And finally something stirs. But I had no such violent feelings to turn me on. Nor wanted them. Who did I have to be angry with? Why does one have to be angry to have sex? The truth is that after all this time, all these doctors, all this research, *I hadn’t the slightest idea what was happening to me.*
the pelvis in response to excitement and stress. A defence of the genitals. Some people did this constantly, compulsively, with the result that the muscles of ‘the pelvic floor’ never relaxed. A sedentary life and, in particular, a job that meant sitting day after day at a desk exacerbated the problem by restricting blood flow to these contracted muscles, which, as a result, suffered fatigue and eventually lost their natural elasticity, tightening and pulling in areas where they shouldn’t, compressing the complex bundles of nerves that threaded the area.

I wasn’t sure what to make of this. I had never seen the expression ‘pelvic floor’ before. What was this thing? All the medical diagrams I had studied restricted themselves to showing the relevant organs—bladder, prostate, kidneys—floating inside a transparent skin and linked by nothing more than the thin tubes that shifted fluids from one to the other. None of the doctors I had spoken to had said anything about how these organs were held in place or what lay in the spaces between them. Rather they took on the quality of heavenly bodies, miraculously fixed in emptiness. Finding it difficult to visualize what was being talked about, I went on Google images, typed in ‘pelvic floor’ and found this:
drops per milligram. In the dead of night, every drop took an age to fall from the small brown bottle glinting in the light above the bathroom mirror and down into the battered drinking cup. Thirty times I watched the drops form. Even slower than my peeing.

Thirty times.

The effect was hypnotic. But I mustn’t look away or I’d lose count. And all the time my hand trembled as it held the bottle. You are old old old, I told myself. Older than the waterseller. Catastrophic thinking.

I tapped the bottom of the bottle. Hurry up! Hurry up! The drop quivered but wouldn’t fall.

Twenty-one—pause—tremble—twenty-two—pause—tremble. Why does it have to be so achingly, achingly slow?

To discourage suicide. With Lexotan, you’d die of boredom before killing yourself.

Back in bed I reflected that maybe I was trying to make something serious happen with this insomnia. I had begun to envy people who were indisputably ill. I wanted to be seriously, seriously ill myself, so that people could see my condition and it would all be out in the open and someone would finally have to do something.

Eventually a narcotic calm stole over me. It was a huge
Be Silent, Oh All Flesh

One late afternoon in June, I closed a door, placed two pillows under my knees, lay back and took a deep breath. I had a book in my hand. It was open at the heading: RESPIRATORY SINUS ARRHYTHMIA BREATHING IN PREPARATION FOR PARADOXICAL RELAXATION.

Daunting.

It was a strange book I had pulled out of its mail-order cardboard a couple of days before. On the Net it had seemed the cover was simply the cumbersome title writ large. Now I saw that the brownish background behind the words was actually a faded reproduction of a Renaissance painting—something famous I’d seen before but couldn’t recall where—showing a seated saint with a splendid beard immersed in a book. At the reader’s shoulder, apparently equally interested in what was written there, were two blond cherubs.
that must be pruned and tamed, pruned and tamed. Above all pruned.

You are supposed not to be thinking.
Or not supposed to be thinking.
Or supposed to be not thinking.

I moved the ‘not.’ Language is always on the move.

Even when I slept I moved. To sleep I needed to be on one side with one knee pushed forward. Then I switched to the other side. Every time I went to the bathroom I turned myself, like meat on a griddle. And I switched my earplug from one ear to the other. I can’t bear having an earplug pressing the pillow.

I pulled the earplug out, turned over, put the earplug in. Six times a night.

In the silence, eyes closed, I remembered a documentary I’d seen years before about some kind of desert lizard that stopped its feet from burning on the hot Sahara sand by constantly and rapidly lifting and dropping the right front foot and back left foot, then the left front and back right. Alternately. They lifted and fell in the blink of an eyelid, almost too quick for the camera to see. A sort of purgatory, I had thought, when I saw the images.

Downstairs someone answered the phone. Even the best earplugs have their limits.

So where was this famous tension I was supposed to be full of?
No sign of it. Niente di niente di niente.
And I started to congratulate myself. I’m getting the hang of it already. Performed the old trick of matching words—‘residual tension’—to experience—the glow of above the knee. Then fastened my mind onto it. Well done, Tim!

What did Wise mean, this was too demanding?
Already I’d lost it. The pain in my belly flared.
Start again.
I did the trick again, contracted the muscle, let it go, found the tension again. Don’t think. Don’t congratulate yourself. Then the corresponding muscle on the other side began to sing too. Without my contracting it first.

Interesting.
I held on to the glow. This feeling. This feeling. This feeling. Instead of the tension dissolving, it grew. Quite suddenly and rapidly. Actually it grew enormously, grotesquely. All at once the muscles on my leg were bursting with tension. Damn. I’d have to move them. They were blazing.

Why hadn’t Wise mentioned this?
Other fires lit up around my body. Close by in my neck. Far away in a calf. Not fires, but flickerings of red heat in the dark expanse of the flesh. The backs of my hands smouldered. A muscle in my cheek sparked. The darkness that had seemed deserted was full of life. Goblins. Havoc.
It ebbed.
Afterward, back at my desk, I was reminded of a passage from *Women in Love* that I had sometimes used in translation lessons. I Googled it.

After a lapse of stillness, after the rivers of strange dark fluid richness had passed over her, flooding, carrying away her mind and flooding down her spine and down her knees, past her feet, a strange flood, sweeping away everything and leaving her an essential new being, she was left quite free, she was free in complete ease, her complete self.

That wasn’t quite it. The experience had been more sudden. More violent. But the business of the mind being flooded away, flooded *clean*, was definitely the same. It felt good. And ‘lapse of stillness,’ I realized, must mean lapse in the sense of thoughtlessness, unexpected unawareness. As in ‘lapsus.’ You had to be still to make it happen. I started to read around the passage.

This is a bizarre and embarrassing moment in *Women in Love*, one of those that prompted critics to jeer at the book. Birkin and Ursula have just had a big argument, then made up, during a country walk. An engagement ring gets tossed back and forth
but wakeful time for the famous paradoxical relaxation. I lay on the sofa. Afterward, six thirtyish, I returned to bed. At which, my wife rolled over and, quite without thinking, we made love.

Perfect.
this magnitude, if I ever did learn to stand up straight and hold a glass of water with the same serene stillness as the waterseller of Seville, then the pains that had set off this whole process would be a distant memory.

This link between posture and pain was no longer just a whimsical notion. *A Headache in the Pelvis* included, as was natural, a long section about the therapeutic massage they offered in their California clinic, together with guided courses in paradoxical relaxation. They had identified, Dr Wise claimed, a number of muscles that, in sufferers of my variety, tended to hide so-called trigger points. That is, as the muscle atrophied with little or improper use, a part of it would become taut; then within that taut band certain areas would grow particularly knotted and sensitive. Press on these ‘contraction knots’ and the patient’s customary pains would immediately be triggered or intensified, often in organs or areas remote from the muscle in question, this thanks to the way nerves passed between layers of muscle. Identify the trigger points and massage them gently over a period of weeks, returning the muscles to something like health, and the pains would subside.

Thus spake Dr Wise.

The muscles involved were primarily those of the pelvic floor, above all the marvelously named levator ani, and the book included disquieting images, as if from inside the body looking downward, of a finger poking up through the anus to
explore and massage these muscles. Each diagram explained where the muscle in question tended to ‘refer pain.’

Once the trigger points had been identified and palpitated by expert massagers in the Stanford clinic, patients would be provided with a special stick or ‘wand’ (the Aneros perhaps) so that they could massage these points themselves. At home.

I wondered if I would ever rise, or sink, to such a do-it-yourself treatment. On my back, knees raised, a fairy wand up my butt. Or on all fours . . .

Best not to think about it.

Some of the offending muscles, however, were more easily and modestly accessible from the outside, in the thighs, around the groin, in and just above the buttocks. One of those that most referred pain to the bladder, my preferred hot spot, was the quadratus lumborum, the muscle that, at each side, attaches the pelvis to the spine. Checking the quadratus lumborum on Wikipedia, I found a detailed description of its susceptibility to deterioration as a result of constant contraction during prolonged periods of sitting, particularly sitting at desks, most particularly
He’d like to look so hard at the rocks and trees that he becomes one of them.’

This time Roland nodded. ‘TV will do that to you,’ he said.

About an hour later I nearly got the end Cleaver desired. It was a shock. The Eisack is a bouncy torrent tumbling through the boulders of a deep gorge, crossed here and there, high above, by the autostrada to the Brenner. It’s strange with icy water on your hands, spray on your face, splashings and gurglings in your ears, to think of those vehicles a hundred feet above, droning across the landscape as if it wasn’t really there. I suppose I go paddling to reconnect with the world, I thought. A moment later I went under.

I had made the mistake, even more unforgivable on the river than during Dr Wise’s paradoxical relaxation, of drifting off into my thoughts: not connecting with the world, then, but reflecting on connecting. Close to the right bank, Roland paddled over the top of a little weir and thumped down onto rocks below. Not concentrating, I assumed this was an error and moved left into the main stream. Roland was yelling now, but I couldn’t hear what. Then I saw that while about a quarter of the river’s flow did go over the weir in the center, the main current was dragging me irresistibly toward a gray iron barrier on
fighting. Go toward it then, as toward the pain. Go underwater.

For a while I studied my dead self against the grille in the dark of the conduit as the river plunged under the barrier. It wasn’t so frightening. There would be a couple of minutes’ choking panic, then the definitive calm. Paintings of drowned people, I thought, tended to show them serene. Millais’s Ophelia is transformed into something more beautiful than she was alive. The weeds and pond water suit her. And now I remembered a recent nightmare in which I found my son drowned in the bath. Tell me it isn’t true, I kept repeating. He was fully clothed, drowned in the tub. Please, it mustn’t be true! It can’t be! But at the same time I was thinking how beautiful he was, how calm and solemn, eyes wide and untroubled. Ophelia is beautiful because she has stopped tearing herself apart over Hamlet. We despair on seeing her, but she is free to become one with the natural world. Relaxed even. Phlebas the Phoenician forgot the profit and the loss. A current under sea picked his bones in whispers.

Still, I reflected more sensibly, how much better, if you could shed the torment without losing your breath forever, if you could stop agonizing over the prince of Denmark, or the consumer price index, without being dead. What my hero Cleaver
There are three tough rapids on Scuol. Naturally one inspects from the bottom up as one drives upriver to the launch spot. The first rapid, which we thus inspected last, has to be faced just a couple of minutes into the run. Too soon. The river narrows from the left to pour over a step of about a meter while a spur of rock jutting from the cliff on the right adds a cushion wave that you have to miss. As you go down into the rough stuff beneath the step—and you must hit it at the exact spot—you have an undercut rock wall to your right that you don’t want to be anywhere near. To make it trickier, just before you can get to the rapid you have to punch through two standing waves, rather like permanent sea breakers, with the result that, even if you’ve seen it properly, your chances of being on course for that sweet spot are not good.

No sooner were we in the water than I screwed up. My mind was superconcentrated but my body seemed stiff, resentful almost of this excited preparation and hyperawareness. The arms were reluctant. Hips and thighs were on strike. As the roar of the rapid approached, I knew what was going to happen. The standing waves knocked me off course. The cushion wave flipped me. I was flushed through the rapid upside down, caught my head on Andy’s boat as I tried to roll up—he was desperately trying to grab me—then took a nasty swim full of knocks and scrapes that tore chunks out of my knuckles. It was disappointing. I was breathing heavily.
wrote, in an exercise book on lined paper, was about his poem ‘Frost at Midnight.’

So why was this relevant? In the car I tried to summon up the details. Coleridge, an intellectual, almost always in poor health, an overweight dreamer, ‘indisposed to all bodily activity,’ boasted that when walking in the mountains he liked to do a climb or descent without bothering to follow a path. Up or down, he just went for it. On Scafell this got him into trouble.

I shook my head. If there was a reason why I was remembering this, I couldn’t see it.

Back in Verona, I Googled the story. Coleridge had felt constricted at his cottage home with wife and child and went walking to get relief. He wrote about his adventures in a letter to the woman he was really in love with, Sara Hutchinson. He liked dangerous walks, he told her, by rivers and waterfalls, on stormy days under heavy rain. ‘I have always found this stretched and anxious state of mind favourable,’ he says, ‘to depth of pleasurable impression.’

At school, of course, they had taught us about the sublime and the cult of feeling. But reading these intimate words, the grand categories didn’t seem important. Rather one wondered,
A rather dull paragraph then explains how Coleridge in fact got out of jail by shinnying down a gully he hadn’t previously noticed.

For some days I let this story turn over in my mind, occasionally going back to the Net to read snippets of the man’s biography or a poem or two. In particular, I tried to find out about Coleridge’s many illnesses. It’s amazing—and this was also true when writing about Thomas Hardy—how many biographies will simply say, Coleridge was ill and so began to take laudanum, to which he became addicted. Without telling you what the illness was. As if one could know a man without knowing his illness. One website said he had a swollen knee. Another that he had rheumatic fever. Shooting in the dark, I Googled ‘Coleridge urine’ and came up with this:

What a beautiful Thing urine is, in a Pot, brown yellow, transpicuous, the Image, diamond shaped of the Candle in it.

Transpicuous! Meaning ‘clear,’ I presume. But the word itself is more conspicuous than transparent. Anyway, here was someone used to peeing at night, used to holding a candle over his chamber pot. I remembered the flashlight in the tent shining down on my plastic bottle.
. . . I gazed upon thee,
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer
I worshipped the Invisible alone.

And elsewhere in a note, this:

To think of a thing is different from to perceive it, as ‘to walk’
is from ‘to feel the ground under you’.

Perceiving Mont Blanc, without thinking it (in words),
Coleridge enters a state of trance, as he was almost in trance on
Scafell. And it was in a kind of trance, as I recalled, that the
Ancient Mariner redeemed himself by blessing the water snakes.
‘Unaware’ is the word. I looked the verse up. ‘He blessed them
unaware.’ It was when—after a ‘lapse of stillness’ perhaps—you
entered into an immediate perception of the world, unmediated
by language, that there was a chance of love and joy gushing
from your heart. ‘No tongue their beauty might declare,’ the
mariner says of the water snakes.

Ineffable.
by three, all but filling a small airless room overlooking the river in central Verona. Warm hands lifted my right foot.

‘Let go,’ a voice said softly. ‘Let me take the weight.’

I tried to relinquish control. The hands took my foot, firmly but gently. Then, after some exploration, resting the heel on one palm, he enquired, ‘Here?’ and pressed a finger into the sole. A connection lit up. The pain shot from foot to bladder and simultaneously from bladder to foot. There was a live wire along the back of my leg.

‘Ow! Yes!’

‘The water meridian,’ Ruggero said.

Beforehand I had been skeptical.

‘If you can’t go to California for the anal massage,’ my wife laughed, ‘why not try some shiatsu?’

Over two months the paradoxical relaxation had gradually subdued the pain. Wider and wider pools of comfort spread out around my sessions. But they were still shallow. There were setbacks. The nights had not improved. Then in my newfound optimism I became impatient. I wanted things to change quickly.
I let these bizarre notions pass in much the same way that I make no comment when my mother talks about the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the inevitability of Armageddon. A flaky, New Age mentality was beckoning. Often, Ruggero said, it was a question of the time of the year, the position of a planet. I recalled Dr Hazan and his birth charts, his theories about tussles in the mind. Each element, Ruggero explained—earth, air, fire, water and wood—had its stronger and weaker seasons. No doubt my troubles were worse in winter.

Ruggero loved to talk of these things, none of them remotely demonstrable. But when he started to touch me, all talking ended. Kneeling on the futon, he seemed to fall into a trance of concentration, or even prayer. When he took hold of a leg or arm, his hands immediately transmitted reassurance and knowledge. You were held, and he was knowing you, through touch. Sometimes he seemed to be waiting for your body to tell him something. He held a hand for some moments without moving. It was all new to me and I have to say beautiful, even moving. Emotions moved in me like mud stirred with a stick. ‘Let go,’ he murmured lifting my head. They were the only words he spoke. Or rather, in Italian, one word: ‘Molla,’ let go.
And I was tiring. The relaxation sessions were getting boring. Occasional waves of relaxation no longer impressed me. I didn’t know where to take them or what else there was to achieve. I began to skip. After all, I still had so much work to do. It was getting more and more difficult to find sufficient time for the university, and my writing, and my translating, and my family, and, of course, the need to keep fit.

So, gradually, the excitement of having ‘cured myself’ gave way to disappointment. A revolution had been left incomplete. It hadn’t delivered. I hadn’t changed. Life is so much longer than any of our enthusiasms, I thought. To every wave its undertow. I dreamed I was on a balcony with wife and friends and we were trying to unravel a wisteria that had grown in and out of the railings to the point that the two seemed inseparable. It was an ancient thing, and I knew it was important to detach every tangled inch of it intact, otherwise it would never flower again. Everybody was helpful and handling the plant, which was my plant, with immense care—but the wisteria did seem so knotted, so stiff, so very old and unbending that sooner or later, I was sure, we would just have to hack the trunk down.
Paradoxical relaxation is done lying down, knees raised over a cushion to flatten the back. Vipassana meditation is done sitting cross-legged like a Buddha. Before confirming my booking, I phoned the meditation center to warn them that I had never been able to sit cross-legged; I wasn’t a flexible guy. They reassured me I could always use a chair. Lying down, however, was not permitted. The back must be upright.

I was anxious.

‘The position is not the problem,’ a man with a haggard, monkish face announced.

On arrival, I was surprised to find people talking. I had assumed the whole retreat took place in silence. Sitting on the front doorstep of the farmhouse, looking out over an Alpine panorama of peaks and stone and misty cloud, a girl in her midtwenties had been expressing her concern (and mine) about spending ten to twelve hours a day with her butt on a low cushion.
we mustn’t disturb those around us; we mustn’t read or write; we mustn’t engage in any other religious or meditative practice; we mustn’t leave the grounds; we mustn’t wear shoes in the meeting room; we mustn’t lie down in the meeting room; we mustn’t sit with our feet pointing toward the teacher.

I had no problem with any of this.

There was one positive instruction: we must ask the teacher, a certain Edoardo Parisi, to teach us Vipassana. He was not proselytizing. We must seek him out.

Repeating a formula that was read out to us, we asked. We wanted to be taught.

There was then a ‘guided meditation.’

The meeting room was a modern wood-and-glass extension built onto the side of the renovated farmhouse, itself perched on the steep slope of the mountain. Outside, rain fell steadily through the darkness. Inside, the only light came from burning logs behind the glass door of a stove and a dim lamp on the floor. The participants, men to one side, women to the other, sat cross-legged on cushions facing the teacher, who was slightly raised on a low dais. Just one elderly lady had chosen a chair. Was it vanity, then, that made me choose to sit cross-legged? Looking around as we removed our shoes and entered the room, I had simply copied the others. Against the wall there was a stack of cushions, hard and soft. I put two under my butt and pillows each side of my feet to support the knees. My ankles had to be yanked into position.
valley with its shreds of cloud and shafts of sunlight, its villages and churches, and then, beyond the valley, the great chain of mountain peaks: woods, scree, snow.

The weeping burst on me like a storm. I shook.

This crisis lasted half an hour. On two occasions I tried to go in to eat—I was hungry—but each time the emotion surged up with renewed force. My throat ached. So I sat on a stone table under a pergola and continued to gaze through my tears across the valley that seemed intensely part of the experience, as if, again, there were nothing separating self and outside—I was truly in this huge panorama, mind and body, weeping.

Then, as though a voice were calling a class register, name after name was announced to my mind, people I knew or had known; and together with the names came faces, bodies, vivid expressions and gestures. One after another, faster and faster, these folk were crowding into consciousness. It was as if, at some carefully engineered surprise party, a door had been thrown open and I was confronted with everyone who ever mattered to me: my wife principally and throughout—we had been together thirty years—then my son, my daughters, my mother and my father, my brother and sister, my friends, lovers, everybody precious, but colleagues too, old acquaintances, neighbors even, they were all here beside me on the terrace
true that it remains largely the same for many years. I recognize my friends year in, year out. In childhood photographs my face is already essentially me, Tim Parks.

As I think these thoughts, the temple dance fades, the lights dim, the painmongers on the lower floors increase their clamor.

Damn and damn.

I choose to forget the debate and concentrate on sensation. I remember Ruggero: treat it as an entirely physical thing.

The thud of the beating heart, the rise and fall of the diaphragm, a burning hoop around the waist, a warm tremor in the belly—very slowly, part by aging part, the body was put together. The book I had translated on early Indian philosophy, Roberto Calasso’s Ka, told the story of the so-called altar of fire. Blessed with longevity, but nevertheless mortal, the lesser gods sought out the first god, Prajapati, whose broken body was dispersed throughout the world, was the world, to ask if there was any way they might be ‘saved.’ ‘You must reconstruct my lost wholeness,’ Prajapati told them. ‘How?’ ‘Take three hundred and sixty boundary stones and ten thousand eight hundred bricks . . . ’ The numbers corresponded to the days and hours of the Vedic year. Every brick was an ‘intense concentration.’

The altar was built from the outside inward, focusing the mind. Its shape was that of the eagle, bird of eternal wakefulness. If ever you managed to complete the construction, a fire would kindle and the eagle would take flight to the paradise of immortality.
yourself *imaginatively* angry. À la Geoff Dyer who himself wanted to be à la D. H. Lawrence. Gritting my teeth, I hung on to the end of the session and stumbled over a fizz of pins and needles to collapse on the lawn in the garden.

The monastery was supposedly in a secluded area, high on a steep, hot hill and surrounded by an impressive stone wall, but the village immediately beneath the hill had arranged its summer festival for this week. At eight in the evening, rock music began, as poorly played as Coleman’s meditations were poorly translated. The summer air filtered out most of the treble, leaving only a dull beat of drum and bass and the lament of a direly strained voice.

Added to which the Olympics were now under way. From the windows of the convent located directly across the courtyard from our meditation room came the sound of nuns cheering on Italian athletes. In China. If there is one thing I loathe, it’s the Olympic Games, festival of empty pieties, crass patriotism and sophisticated performance drugs. It was extraordinary how excited and patriotic those old nuns were. Apparently it did not occur to them they might be disturbing us. What a terrible, terrible farce all this was. Ten days of my precious and very busy life wasted!

Still I hung on. I had no idea why. My diligence was a mystery to me. One day I wondered if they had deliberately
pencil manuscripts in a fair hand for the publishers, using a pen. Detached from the moment of creation, or self-revelation, self-affirmation, the pen was mysteriously usable again. But later he left his work in pencil without trying to publish it, and later still he stopped writing altogether.

I kept thinking about Walser in relation to this conundrum of self-presentation, of simultaneously wanting to take the stage and truly not wanting to take it, above all not wanting to want to take it, or not wanting to be seen to want to take it. And wasn’t there something of the same conundrum in Coetzee’s disquieting decision to write his autobiography in the third person? As if he wasn’t writing about himself, but someone else. And no one is harder on that someone else than Coetzee in Boyhood and Youth, that person responsible for his committing the unforgivable indiscretion of writing these books. He was hard on himself because he was writing books about himself. And everyone knew it. Even though he pretended it wasn’t himself. That was what he hated. Writing about himself, he wrote against himself. Himself being a writer writing himself. ‘Not I,’ Beckett proclaimed. Or had a mouth proclaim. A mouth without a face. Without an I, without an eye. ‘Shall I
I watched the others bringing tea and kiwis out into the garden. On day one, day two, day three, people had walked vigorously up and down, or lain on the grass to do situps and stretching exercises. It was a flat, symmetrical Renaissance-style garden, a lawn split by a cross of paths. Now on day four everybody was moving in slow motion. People would take a few steps then stop, standing absolutely motionless for five minutes, even ten, transfixed. They sipped their tea slowly, peeled their kiwis as if it didn’t matter whether they ever actually ate the fruit or not. Nobody was exercising. I too had lost any desire to exercise. And I had the impression that I wasn’t the only one to have been caught out by the Vipassana. There was a shell-shocked look to the young man passing back and forth in front of me, placing one foot in front of another, heel to toe, as if walking a tightrope over an abyss.

Then it seemed to me that the only way to force an irreversible change in my life would be to dump the project that had been driving me, goading me, making me ill, I decided, for as long as I could remember: the *WORD PROJECT*. If illness is a sign of election in an author, I thought—where had I read that?—then renouncing writing might be a necessary step to being well. Not that I was actually *ill* any more. But I certainly wasn’t *healed* either. Otherwise, what was I doing in this crazy place?

Pulling my ankles into place for the next cross-legged hour, I remembered it had been V. S. Naipaul who had said that to me.
He didn’t bother to say, what then?

Please, I thought, while the translator trundled through his deadpan approximation for the benefit of the very few Italians who hadn’t already grasped the idea, please, do me the favor of finding an object of desire that it would be genuinely hard to relinquish.

I must have a certain woman.
I must win the Nobel Prize.

It irritated me immensely that he drivelled on about this red Ferrari. People on meditation retreats are hardly the kind to sell their souls for a sports car.

I supposed.

Sometimes Coleman felt too tired to talk and had his translator read us something directly in Italian, while he looked on with the same bland smile on his face.

‘There are ten levels of awareness in Vipassana meditation,’ the translator read, swinging his one leg from the tabletop.

_Sammasana_, theoretical recognition of _anicca_, _dukkha_ and _anatta_ (change, dissatisfaction, emptiness), through observation and analysis;

_Udayabbaya_, awareness of the appearance and dissolution of _nama_ and _rupa_, mind and material, through observation and analysis;
and stood there smiling, beautifully—she was wearing a beautiful dress—and said she was lost for words, quite lost, because she had never imagined she could win, she hadn’t prepared anything to say. And I knew this was false because I had been to lunch with her the day before and she seemed more than prepared to win. If nothing else, the bookmakers were listing her as the odds-on favorite. So this speech, like the one I never delivered, had been carefully prepared, I realized, and prepared, like mine, to seem modest and unprepared, hence doubly false.

Then Salman Rushdie walked over to me and frowned and said if it was him he would be furious; he would be throwing chairs round and complaining that he should have won. I smiled and said I was furious, but not in this particular moment, just generally. Generally in a fury. If I threw chairs around all the time there would be nowhere for anyone to sit.

How can one lead such a life without running into an ulcer or two?

Stop.

I suppose it has taken me an hour and more to write down these last few reflections, but it only takes a second or two for them to flash through the mind as you try to focus on the breathing on your lips. How many times did these ideas race through my head in the following days, in the long silent dawns, in the guided sessions as guru Coleman invited us to explore our bodies, in the twilight hour with the cackling nuns and the
clashing music and the strong cries of children playing outside the monastery walls? Stop writing, I told myself. Enough. Enough.

Uncalled for, unwanted, the thoughts flew across my mental space, back and forth, hither and thither, like birds in the evening sky, chasing and losing and finding each other, racing, wheeling, dispersing, gathering, gliding a while then flapping in hard flight, always moving, through each other and across each other, at different altitudes, different speeds, as the light fails and the breeze comes up and the rain spatters on rustling leaves. Then one by one, at last, they begin to settle, they drop from view. With a last flutter, a thought settles on its perch and is quiet. On a rooftop perhaps, or on your wrist, in your throat.

Another joins the first, and another. Thoughts fluffing their feathers before falling still. Perhaps one last squawk—Rushdie was right! I should have hurled a chair!—then silence. Until, huddled together on their wire, between your ears, they lose definition, merge into each other, become a single pool of feathery shadow, deep shadow in the darkness, one layer beneath another, beneath others, as eyes close behind closed eyelids, watched by still deeper eyes, and the mind at last discovers itself transparent; the mind is finally still and clear as clear water, and from top to toe the body brims with transparent wordless mind the way a glass held between steady hands in the porticoed chiascuro of a sizzling afternoon in Seville.
might brim with transparent water around the dark secret of the black fig.

It was on the sixth or seventh evening that I came to myself in the meditation room and found I was alone: the others had gone. I was late for bed.
moving, thinking, doing, we didn’t notice. But by taking the five precepts and practicing Anapana, we had stripped off the asbestos and cracked open the stove. Then we felt our karma’s painful heat. Now, day by day, with Vipassana, we would go into every corner of the stove, we would turn the coals so that they glowed and scorched. It was hard, he said. But slowly, surely, they would burn themselves out and all would be calm. Our minds would be pure and empty.

I thought: So they wait until the seventh day to tell you that the whole thing is based on pain, experiencing pain, accepting pain, something that, had you been informed beforehand, would most likely have deterred you from coming.

‘Attachment to self,’ Coleman said, ‘is so strong that we will never be rid of it unless the suffering we feel within is stronger.’ I remembered Beckett’s *Endgame.* ‘You must learn to suffer better than that, Clov, if you want them to weary of punishing you—one day.’

I had developed a curious state of mind during these evening talks. I believed nothing. I found the ideas ridiculous and contradictory: if life was utterly empty, how could you ascribe a value to purity, how could there be rules governing reincarnation based on your behavior? etc, etc. At the same time, I listened attentively, I enjoyed listening, and I saw that there were indeed ways in which Coleman’s words could be applied to my
‘We’re speaking now,’ he eventually said. ‘We’re using words now. It’s quite pleasant, isn’t it? Maybe useful.’

‘It’s different with books.’

The way he watched made you feel that despite his eighty and more years, he was focused on you, he cared. Then the answers were offhand.

‘But books are wonderful things.’ He chuckled. ‘I even wrote one myself way back.’

‘The Tranquil Mind.’

‘That’s right.’

I had seen a copy on the table outside the meditation room.

‘It’s not a very good book, I don’t think, but an effective way of communicating a lot of information to a large number of people.’

Realizing I would get nowhere, I said abruptly, ‘Mr Coleman, perhaps you could help me with a smaller thing. I have trouble sitting up straight when I’m meditating. Especially here. At home I seem to manage. Here my back just collapses. I keep feeling I’m going to keel over.’

Coleman reflected, or appeared to. Perhaps it was the merest performance.

‘I used to have a lot of problems sitting up straight,’ he said.
that simple. I shook my head, hesitated, and turned back down the corridor.

I had never entered the meditation room in the middle of a session. I closed the door as quietly as I could, and even so, as it clicked, a tremor ran through the bodies around me. The door was at the back of the room, where three or four people sat on chairs. I passed them and padded barefoot up the narrow space between the men, two by two on mats to the left, and the women, two by two to the right. The four windows along the right-hand wall were open and a soft summeriness drifted in. Nevertheless I was aware of an intense, still calm, a hum almost. There was a collective mental energy around me that seemed tangible, as though I were wading through a warm sea of mind.

Having reached my place, I stood still to take a last look. Rows and rows of seated and kneeling figures. A fat man on a mountain of cushions. A gaunt Arab-looking boy who used nothing more than a low block of wood for a seat. Some sat straight-backed, some bowed. There were smooth, untroubled faces, frowning faces, faces smiling faintly. Some had all the gear, the oriental shawls, the cushions with esoteric symbols; some wore washed-out shorts, shapeless T-shirts. The pregnant
In slow motion we went to the meditation room. The man behind me took his place, eyes closed, lips pressed together. I hadn’t heard him cough for days. The man in front was a sack of coal, bulk settling into bulk. The woman to my right perched electrically still; she was a bird, a parrot. She could fly off at any moment.

I closed my eyes and waited. Sure enough, other eyes opened in the dark. I was in the pitch dark putting out to sea. Mine was a frail craft, an oarless skiff. I wasn’t concerned. I had put out to sea before without coming back. It wasn’t a problem. The keel grated on the stones and bobbed free, free as the breath floating on my lip.

How quickly I’d got going!

Time passed. Despite sitting still, my body was twisting; my face had detached itself from my head, it was drifting away: lips, nose and eyes stretched and skewed like a gargoyle’s. It didn’t matter. The sea has its tides and currents. Looking across the space between skull and skin, I saw coils of gray smoke under my nostrils. I watched the smoke turn. It seemed extraordinarily delicate. The coils were very tight and fluffy among the hairs poking from my nostrils.

‘May all beings,’ Coleman’s voice boomed out, ‘be free from all attachment.’ A tremor stiffened my back. I hadn’t heard him come in. He sighed heavily and said, ‘Today, our last day, the
What? What is perfect? And when?
I opened my eyes and watched Coleman read. Like my father, he knew the text so well he barely needed to look at it.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

Did I ever become a man? I wondered. And what would it mean, to know as one was known? Who really knows me anyway? Nobody. Despite all your novels and half confessions, nobody knows you. There was something very fine about the words ‘through a glass darkly,’ so fine that you hardly wanted to know things any other way. Through a glass darkly was OK by me. Or through a glass brightly, like the waterseller and the young boy.

Coleman paused and launched into the last great verse:

For now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Why, I demanded—my head shaking slowly from side to side—why why why wasn’t it possible for me to have the bene-
in the garden, a cup of herb tea in my hand, when the man who had talked about shaving his mustache to feel the breath on his lip came and sat down beside me. It was the only bench in the shade. He was a big athletic man in his early forties, I suppose. The sun was hot. We were sitting a foot or two apart on the bench and did not look at each other. We observed the Noble Silence. Yet at once there was an uncanny communion between us. I felt it instantly, intensely, and I knew he was feeling it too. We both knew, without having looked for it or wanted it, that the other was feeling a deep sympathy, a knowledge, but devoid of content. A knowledge of each other. We were both surprised and knew we were surprised. We were both glad, quietly. It must have lasted some minutes. I didn’t know him from Adam. But crazy as it will seem, I do believe that if some old man had poured us a glass of water from an earthenware pot, with a fig in the bottom of course, and offered it to us, we would both have put a hand on that glass, myself and the man who hadn’t shaved his mustache, and held it there, on the shady bench in the sunny garden, held it perfectly still, without looking at the water, without looking at each other.

Was this charity?

How can you, I wondered, as Coleman shared his merits now with American generals and Iraqi suicide bombers, how
dictionaries clatter to the floor. The noise prompts a deep inhaling of breath throughout the room, then renewed activity. A dozen keyboards are at work.

‘Fidel Gets Religion,’ the article is headlined. Then a subtitle: ‘Why on earth did Castro build a Russian Orthodox cathedral in Havana?’

I have sometimes envied Christopher Hitchens. Always on the move, in the public eye, provocative, admired, presumably well paid. The article begins:

In January of 2009—on New Year’s Day, to be precise—it will have been half a century since the brave and bearded ones entered Havana and chased Fulgenzio Batista and his cronies (carrying much of the Cuban treasury with them) off the island. Now the chief of the bearded ones is a doddering and trembling figure, who one assumes can only be hanging on in order to be physically present for the 50th birthday of his ‘revolution.’ It’s of some interest to notice that one of the ways in which he whiles away the time is the self-indulgence of religion, most especially the improbable religion of Russian Orthodoxy.

On the other hand, would I want to write this sort of thing? Does Hitchens really care about Cuba? Or Cuba about Hitchens? Or the reader about either? ‘... who one assumes can only be hanging on in order to be physically present’ is horrible.
What I want them to notice is how the nondescript man’s dilemma—shall I go into the cathedral or shan’t I?—occurs as an extended temporal parenthesis inside what is really a simple statement whose main clause appears only in the very last words: Then, while . . . blah blah blah . . . out flew the airplane over Ludgate Circus. The syntax, with the long interpolation after ‘while,’ creates the sort of suspension—mind off at a tangent before some event intervenes—that Woolf loved. The effect is completely absent in the Italian, which gives, ‘Meantime a man carrying a leather bag did this that and the other . . . then a plane flew toward Ludgate Circus.’

Towards?

It’s tough comparing translations with their originals because the student has to overcome the expectation that the professional translator is always going to be right. He has to think against something already thought, undo something done. It’s not unlike the effort one has to make to resist received ideas. In this case the translator didn’t understand ‘without a situation,’ didn’t realize that we’re probably talking about some unemployed sectarian pamphlet-pusher now tempted to return to mother church. Above all, she didn’t really understand that provocative reflection: ‘tokens of victories not over armies, but over, he thought, that plaguy spirit of truth seeking which leaves
So if I can recount the first minutes, I can’t tell the rest. There are deepenings. There is a liquefaction of some kind, the thighs flowing into the calves, the head into the breast. And there are resistances: stones, obstructions, pains. The mind goes back and back to them. An ankle. A shoulder. Maybe they will shift, and maybe not. I am absolutely awake. I hear Rita pad downstairs with the dog behind her. I hear a motor scooter straining up the hill. And I am not there. I am in the stream.

Then the alarm sounds and I must move. I’m up, dressed and getting Lucy into the car in just a few minutes. By ten past seven we are speeding down the hill, trying to beat the traffic light at San Felice. Lucy is anxious about some homework, a possible low grade. I repeat the parents’ mantra: you do your best, then what happens happens.

We stop at a pasticceria for cappuccino and croissant. On the table newspaper headlines tell me that a bomb in Baghdad has killed one hundred forty-seven, the governor of Lazio has resigned after being filmed naked together with male prostitute and cocaine, AC Milan scored in the ninetieth minute to beat Chievo 2–1. I pay in a hurry and drive Lucy another mile to her bus stop. She disappears in the crowd.

Parking outside my office, I’m aware of those small everyday actions that stand between me and my work. The blue key for the gate. The yellow key for the front door. The stairs, the