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# The Turn of the Screw

Joyce Carol Oates

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# The Turn of the Screw

to Gloria

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Joyce Carol Oates

TUESDAY, JULY 6.

A wide stony beach. Pebbles big as hands. Here the sky is bluer than it is at home. Got out of the hotel before anyone could say hello—need to be alone after last night. Uncle and his hacking cough! Stayed up most of the night with him. His coughing is like the noise of the earth, its insides shifting. I imagine the earth splitting to draw the old man down, his body tumbling into the crater, into Hell. . . .

(Curious about Hell: will the flames make much noise?)

Had to read the Bible to him while he lay there coughing and spitting. Didn't pay attention to me. Finally he slept—around five. I fell onto my bed fully dressed and slept until seven. Sleep like death. In the morning I got out fast, my head echoing with Uncle's awful noises . . . so glad to be alone! And then a strange thing happened. . . .

A mile from the hotel. Me walking fast, enjoying the air, the smell of the sea. Great gulping breaths of air. My new boots slick with mud, my eyes fixed on the ground before me . . . glancing up I saw a girl, hardly more than a child. Twelve, thirteen years old.

Staring at me!

TUESDAY, JULY 6.

Alone here, hidden, sick at heart. Away from that horrible numerosity. The oppression of the London sky, terraces bathed in evil light, the tonnage of history, too many horizons brought up short. . . . Chimneys that mock, beckon. Stained and weathered like cheeses. . . .

The stern demanding sea. It, too, mocks. But it does not know me. *Idle now for weeks, for a month and a half.*

Dying by the sea, Wearing the same two or three sets of clothes—no need to change—anonymous gentleman dark-ringed about the eyes with failure—afraid of new arrivals at the hotel: but they are all strangers. This morning I nearly collided with the young man I had noticed last night—he and an older man, probably his father, arrived yesterday, the old man apparently quite ill—Saw him walking along the beach, alone. Rather finely dressed and yet with a look—how strange that I should feel so certain of this!—of being doubtful of his clothes, as if they belonged to someone else. A waistcoat of pale satin. Excellent boots. Hatless, dark red hair, very strong features—the eyebrows are especially dark and firm—the eyes downcast as if searching

She called out something to me, a stranger. A high wheedling voice. Words I couldn't hear. My senses rushed together, stinging. I was deaf. A pull to my insides. Pain. Ah, that girl!—not pretty but full-faced, full-bodied, her eyes gleaming slits above her coarse pinkened cheeks—eyes gleaming as if there were already a secret between us! A dress of some green material, shapeless over her full hips and thighs; her plump little feet in boots, splattered with mud; her cheeks red as if pinched, very excited, strange dark eyes gleaming . . . . A head of curls—dark blond, depths of blond and shadow, enough to make my body ache. Licking her lips. One foot extended slightly as if in a dance. Cried out to me—a question—her voice tilting upward shrilly—but the noise of the waves drowned her out, my blood drowned her out, pulsing in my ears. Her gleaming eyes. The mist seemed to thicken and cloak us both. My eyes filmed over, filmed over. . . .

Bell-like tone to her voice. I could see now the veins in her throat.

Behind her, half a mile from the beach, a building like a fortress—is it a church? A warehouse? Stinging film over my eyes . . . my heart is pounding violently . . . Around us on the beach: no one. Empty. Heart pounding, temples pounding, a dense dew-like moisture on every part of my body, cold and slick as fog, my insides in pain. . . . Suddenly I thought of my uncle back in the hotel: *he might be dying.*

A thicket for us. Giant bushes, spongy ground. The pebbles fade. The girl backs away from me. Wide staring smile. Her face protruding, plump. Something about her wet mouth that

out his fate *there*, on the ground. Something heraldic about him—a figure for art—My senses stung at the sight of him—

Then I saw, standing farther up the bank, near a thicket, that poor little girl who runs loose in the town sometimes—“not right in the head”—she was beckoning to the young American. Some shy instinct made me halt, back up—what would happen? I wanted to turn and hurry away. Befuddlement everywhere about us—the crashing of the waves—the young man's agitation—His smart clothes suddenly the clothes of an actor. *I must leave, must leave!*

Flushed face—the girl's frizzy blond hair—my own strange elation—*She is putting her hand out to him, she is calling to him* but I am too far away to hear.

He will touch her, take hold of her arm. He will approach her and touch her. The three of us stand on the beach in total silence.

Waiting.

It is too late for me to turn and hurry away—my own face flushed and dangerously heated—something churns in my brain and fixes me here to the spot—*His back is to me: What does his face show?*

She is staring up into his face—she *sees*—what words are passing between them? What words are spoken at such a time?

He approaches her. His stiff back. She draws away, teasing. Giant bushes will hide them from me. Panting, dizzy. I will be sick. He has taken hold of her now—yes, he has touched her—the two of them drawing back, back, almost out of my sight—they will hide

is fearful . . . but I cannot stop, it is too late, I cannot stop my hand from reaching out to her . . . There! Her arm, her elbow. My fingers close about her elbow. Giggling, backing away . . . a branch catches in her hair and then snaps away again, snaps straight . . . my fingers sliding up her arm to the shoulder and she is laughing faintly, breathily, the down on her upper lip is gleaming as if with cunning, she is very young, no more than twelve or thirteen years old . . . her chest rising and falling . . . little body stumbling backwards, drawing us both backwards into the thicket. . . .

She gave a jump. A little scream. Jerked away from me—pointed somewhere behind me—what was it? I couldn't see anything. What? Overcome with panic—I *have made a terrible mistake. My uncle has followed me.* The girl ran away. Behind me on the beach there was nothing, no one, I stood there trembling and staring back up the beach, no, nothing, no one, and yet I had the idea that someone had been standing there watching us only a few seconds before. . . .

Not my uncle . . . ?  
Slick with sweat. Oh, reeking. My head is still pounding. If anyone had seen . . . if anyone. . . . Uncle would abandon me, like the rest, if he had seen. . . .

God: help me to get through each day.

themselves from me—it is going to happen, it is going to happen—

The girl screamed suddenly. Leapt back.

Must have seen me.

I hurry up the bank, must hide. Must get out of their sight. Heart sickened with fear, panic . . . I must not stumble. . . .

Reddening terrible face.

The dowdy room I have taken: its small charms and beguilements, etched glass, lace curtains, the dust of sorrow, sorrow, sorrow. . . .

In the mirror my face surprises me. So pale, so frightened! I had thought it to be, for one confused moment, the face of that young man.

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WEDNESDAY, JULY 7.

Papers still filled with Victoria's Jubilee. Uncle Wallace at breakfast, robust and scornful, an excellent mood. Eggs, ham, toast, marmalade,

WEDNESDAY, JULY 7.

Sleepless. Preoccupied. Idle now for a month and a half. My life: turned over and over as I turn this paper-

buns. Snatches up the paper to read me an item: snorts with disgust. Breakfast takes an hour and a half. The dining room has a high cavernous ceiling: everything echoes. The room is not much used, the hotel not much used. Everyone looks English except us. Cold mealy independent faces.

A woman in her early fifties at a near table . . . dull red-blond hair, brusque mannish gestures . . . but her face is attractive as she glances toward me, past her husband. Uncle does not see. Reading the third newspaper, grunting, coughing up something into his napkin. . . . By the seaside windows an English family with three children—the oldest a girl about ten. A child. Alone at another table is a middle-aged man in a rough tweedy jacket, too big for him, sipping tea. Reading a paper. Very British. Lifting the paper to turn it he glances toward Uncle and me—our eyes meet—then he looks away. A large rigid face. Eyes piercing.

With Uncle at the seaside. Grunts, clearing his throat vigorously, staring out at the sea. It disappoints him. Spits something up in his handkerchief. *What if he dies . . . ?* My first trip to Europe; three months of travel ahead; what if he sickens and dies and leaves me alone? No. Behind him is my father. His brother. Dying also, dying very slowly. Decades of it. In Boston they take decades. *Quarles Ltd., Dry Goods.*

Loosed, what would my body do . . . ? Run from this wreck of a man. Run. Noble wreck, ruined noble face. Cascades of wrinkled shrivelled flesh on his neck! Back in Boston they are frowning sourly over us—two of a kind, two failures. Uncle and nephew. When Uncle Wallace was my age he was already a father . . . Then the

weight in my hand, something to be flung down, forgotten.

Breakfast. Careful not to stare at *him*. Hot, hot tea. There is a delightful family at a window table—rather hazy light—rain today? No matter.

I will bicycle out into the isolation.

My heart has been turning inside me, tugging to one side. A leaden sickish tug. I surrender. . . . He is sitting with the old gentleman, wearing clothes that fit him splendidly. Yet somehow not *his*. I turn my paper very briskly, neatly, to draw his attention. . . . An instant of our exchanging a glance . . . perhaps he recognizes me from yesterday?

His eye wanders away from me.

Close-curling red hair. Handsome, pale, American face. Sits erect at the table like a son. I imagine he is perhaps twenty-five years old, and most dreadfully bored in the company of that old man, somehow thrown in with him for a trip, yet I don't believe that they are father and son. . . .

Absurdly sad: they are leaving the dining room. Yet an elation—the prospect lies ahead of further meetings, accidental meetings. Is there a mysterious and perhaps incomprehensible alliance here?

Subdued. A solitary breakfast. The family has left the dining room now—I hear excited talk of a carriage, an excursion—two girls and a boy, beautiful children. The boy is by far the youngest and walks with a bold stride. To be a father, a father of that particular boy. . . . What would that

children died. First the boy, then the girl. Then the wife. Now I am his son, maybe. Two failures.

Uncle in a chair below the hotel. Attendants eager to please. Cool for July, they talk of the chance of clearing by this afternoon, always squinting at the sky and making prophecies. The middle-aged lady greets us doubtfully; yes, it is cool for July, she says. I am bored, bored. In a canvas chair beside Uncle. Staring at the sea. More blue here than back home—choppy distances—I cannot stop thinking of that girl of yesterday, that child on the beach. My body tries to shrivel. I think of my cousin Madeline—that face of hers. Accusing me. *He said things to me! Said things!*

Like a girl of twelve, herself. But she was twenty-four.

Next week I will be thirty.

Uncle clearing his throat loudly, spreading a blanket across his knees; more newspapers. Brings the edge of his fingers hard across his moustache. Someone pauses near him. Cane in hand, jaunty for a man his age, his beard trimmed to a spade-like shape. Dark. Neat. He is a gentleman but nervous—wears a polka-dot bow tie and a golfing cap. Heavy-set in the thighs and torso.

Uncle Wallace and he are talking. “. . . north of Boston . . .?” “. . . the Clintons, Arnold Clinton, finance . . . imports . . .?” “. . . crowds in London? . . . awful!”

My eye is drawn out to the edge of the sea.

Women: the girl of yesterday. Eyes secretive as slits. Her foot—the mud—

mean? How could it be experienced, so deep and terrifying a condition? Beautiful children!

Idle. Yet a small fever begins in me, as if I were about to start work. Idle and nervous. But I see that I am not heading for my room, no, I am walking quite reasonably headlong into a kind of hush—post-breakfast solemnity in this droll old hotel, all in a kind of hush, the fixtures overdone and pompous and hushed, a held breath, as in that eerie moment when something gathers or crouches in preparation for an attack. . . .

Ah, the beach. Poor helpless eyes bobbing about—from horizon to shore—there they are, seated. The old man humped and tyrannical. The young man with legs crossed; white trousers, handsome high-button shoes, an air of indolence and impatience. The son of a wealthy father, certainly.

Approaching the old gentleman. His sudden raised face—querulous watery eyes—yet I introduce myself quite easily. Ah, yes, they are Americans; should I seem surprised? From Boston. It turns out that we know someone in common. I chat quite happily, quite easily with the old man. My agitation seems to have subsided. Ignore the young man’s stare—it is good to hear my own voice again—too conscious of Self, too haunted, driven by Self, always Self. I must overcome myself.

Patrick Quarles II. His name.

I think of Dickens—for we are near David Copperfield’s country—no, I think of Stendhal: a young man

the ankle—the pale stockings—the calf of the leg inside the stocking—the knee—the thigh—

Old men chattering: of London, of crowds, *this screaming, clumsy overdoing of a fine thing*, the man in the golfing cap says.

Ah, the cords of her little throat were taut with concentration! Cheap material of the dress drawn tight across the small bosom, tight as the veins of the throat, the tense arteries of the stomach, the loins . . . blue-veined thighs, the shadowy soft insides of thighs. . . . *London defaced: an atrocious sight. Miles of unsightly scaffolding . . . a sudden, new vision of our age, an unwelcome perspective of the century that lies ahead. . . . Machinery . . . that infuriates and deflowers and destroys. . . .*

Walking slowly down the beach. Why do I want to run, run away from them, the chatter of old men!—a root is alive in me, stirring in me. Trembling. Ugh. I am alive and the old men are dying or are dead, if I glance over my shoulder at them I would see only two aging gentlemen—one in a canvas chair, bundled up for a cool July morning, the other with a cane thrust through his arm, words that do not matter, a flow of words that do not matter the way the pebbles of this wide wet beach matter—and behind them, in America, my own father stands like a monument, his shadow rooted to him at his base, unshakable. Can you shake them? You walk away from them.

I light a cigar.

lounging idly, restlessly, ambitious and yet not strong enough to direct the progress of the story he is in. Condemned almost and never to be quite *real*, quite sympathetic. *He seems to be listening as I speak of London. . . .* He is a man marked for some strange destiny. For women? Yes, but more. He does not know what his fate will be. *Nervous, I am beginning to be nervous. . . .* He is like a young animal: no history.

The old man contains all their family history. Draws it up into him. We chatter wonderfully, two Americans, he seems to be impressed with my denunciation of the Jubilee nonsense. Can understand best harsh abrasive words.

The young man gets to his feet suddenly, unaccountably, and strolls away. . . .

The old man is a large monument: the nephew a small marker. In a flash I see their family gravesite. Yes, I, standing here so helplessly and timidly, cane tucked through my arm, smiling and smiling, a gravestone of too fragile a substance: the wintry gusts from this sea would destroy me.

THURSDAY, JULY 8.

Was informed of a letter for me—  
took it from the clerk, surprised, for  
who would write to me?—having left  
home as I did—could not recognize the  
handwriting—walked confused out the  
front of the hotel, almost slipped  
on the steps that were wet from the  
morning's rain—tore open the  
envelope nervously—

*My Dear Boy,*

*I am anxious for this letter to do  
nothing except soothe you, encourage  
you, insist upon the simple joy you  
have given me by existing so  
innocently and so nobly as yourself.  
From my timid post of observation  
your future strikes me as rich and  
enormously open, wide as the ocean—  
and I beg that you do not destroy it  
by any impulsive act—for, you see, I  
was a most reluctant and helpless  
witness to Tuesday's small episode—  
or by any systematic and perhaps  
more wasteful surrender of your youth  
to another's age. Be free: I rejoice in  
your very being.*

No signature.

I stumbled along the street—cobble  
street—row upon row of small blank  
houses, shops, the tower of the  
church and its crumbling ivy wall—  
mind in a whirl—panic—must tear up  
this letter and get rid of it—

Went into a pub. Seated, my eyesight  
blotched. Din inside my head. Last  
night Uncle kept me awake again,  
reading the Bible to him. Words kept  
rising in my head: *Why doesn't he  
die!* My fear of him, my love for him.  
*Why don't they all die, die!* I order  
a small beer and drink it at once  
and in the instant in which I close  
my eyes I can see their bodies

THURSDAY, JULY 8.

Walking quickly along the shore.  
Unable to think. *Must think.* Not fit  
for company now—my face a mask  
of grimaces, taunts, smirks, bewildere-  
ments, small pains and pleasures,  
featureless as the sea. Not human now.  
Not human. To have dared what I  
did! . . . A sleepless night, palpitating  
heart. Absurd attempts at prayer.  
Godless prayer. But something, some-  
thing must aid me, must beguile me  
out of myself . . . out of the memory of  
what I have done . . . memories of  
Father's fits of madness, the Imaginary  
seizing his throat, the Demon always  
beside him, squatting, leaping up  
when he did not, could not, have  
expected it. . . . Am I my father's  
son, after all?

Heroism: acquiescing to that  
madness.

At the bottom of my soul it squats,  
like that dwarf of a demon: the fear  
that I am mad, evil, reckless, sick,  
corrupting, contaminating, loosed,  
formless, sucking like the waves here  
upon the packed sand, desolate, in-  
exhaustible, damned. . . .  
Why did I write him that letter?

Yet—the joy of this morning! The  
utter abandoned joy of the writing, the  
sealing of the envelope, the very slow,  
slow, firm addressing of a name that  
suddenly seems to have been my  
own invention, to have been known to  
me all my life: *Patrick Quarles II.*

What is he? A disinherited son—so I  
have gathered. He has the look  
of a London urchin grown and clothed



bobbing and ebbing in a tide, the bodies of the old, old men, tossed up toward an anonymous shore that is neither American nor English, just a shore, just bodies of the dead. *Why don't they die and free us from them? —free us to life?*

Spent the afternoon. Seagoing men here—retired men—noisy in their greetings—“What ho!” they call out to each other when they meet—then fall into silence—but the silence is not awkward. Women. Moving about. They glance at me and my heart feels enormous, suffocating. One woman stares openly at me. A broad smile, straggly hairs on her forehead . . . skin not pale like Madeline’s but opaque, blunt . . . *easing the stocking from her muscular leg, heavy flesh, dark hairs growing out of the flesh* . . . but I stand suddenly, hurry away. Must get back to the hotel before Uncle is angry.

I tore the letter up into small pieces and threw it away.

splendidly—an actor—a nervous flitting consciousness that no clothes can define—*I will clothe you.*

What will happen when our eyes meet? That fateful terrifying instant of our common *knowledge!* I will bow to him, I will acknowledge everything meekly. . . . Breath in ragged spurts. Aging. My best work is behind me. Now, ahead of me, is work of another kind . . . He is so young, he is pure instinct. The old man, the uncle, wants to suck his energy. Ignorant old man! I am mad to have such thoughts. . . . sharp pain in my chest as I climb the hotel steps, which seem suddenly steep, mountainous. . . . Is he here, waiting? The letter in his hand, waiting?

---

FRIDAY, JULY 9.

Excursion by carriage. Out along the country roads in spite of the drizzle. Uncle’s sour cough. Forgave me for leaving him yesterday: his heir.

Women. Foul and sluggish in their evil. Mud on my boots, scummy feel of my own skin. My cousin’s tears and red-rimmed eyes. The woman in the tavern: the veins of her flesh would have been hidden deep inside that opaque fatty skin.

Afternoon tea: Uncle gorges himself. Buns, jam. Beer. Whiskey. Coffee. Small meat pie. My duty to rise obediently as a son, to seek out more

FRIDAY, JULY 9.

Sleepless. Feverish and very happy. Three letters composed for him, and I hardly know which to select. All of them?

The chambermaid listens with her good plain worried gaze upon me. I begin explaining carefully, but end by stammering, my eyes filled with moisture—“Mr. Quarles is an extremely sensitive gentleman . . . and he would be distressed to be told that he walked off with my letters this morning . . . he quite simply picked them up by accident, when we paused to chat together. . . . I called after him, of course, but, as you may

food. Which village are we in? What is its name? The map I studied is marked with names of places I had wanted to explore—Blundeston, Great Yarmouth, Bournemouth itself—but everything passes now before my eyes in a mist, my senses sting, the machinery of my brain races ahead to what, to what?—

*Caution*, the letter advised.

What does that mean?—why caution?—Am I about to do something I must be urged against? *Uncle's piggish grunts. The Royal Bath Hotel. Will I outlive him?* Sat in the pub with him, a lonely pub. Thought of hell. Spirits brushing against us in daylight, the damned. What could they tell us about hell if they could speak?

Dutiful nephew to a sick man.

Nothing more.

know, he doesn't hear quite so well . . . and . . . and I would actually prefer not to bring the matter up to him, and certainly I would prefer never to see the poor letter again if it were a question of . . . a question of insulting him, however indirectly. . . ." Nods in sympathy with me. Grimly. Out of her mild gaze I think I see something growing—sharp and deadly and cunning—but no, I must be imagining it. Imagining it. She replies that it is out of her control. Only the manager, perhaps. . . . Very hard for her to know what to do. . . . But no, no, I say at once, the manager must absolutely not be bothered; I will surrender the letter—gaily I tell her this, ready to back away—She frowns, blinks slowly and stupidly at me—Suddenly she consents.

Ah, she consents! And within five minutes we are *there*, in that room! The Quarles have taken a rather grand suite of rooms. A sitting room of really lavish proportions—excellent furniture—a carpet in much finer condition than the one in my sad little room—a balcony that stares out wonderfully at the sea and sky. There is a little old antique of a writing desk which I approach, under the chambermaid's watchful eye, for my letter would be here if Mr. Quarles had really walked off with it—and humbly, timidly I bend over the desk, in that good lady's sight, and do not touch anything on it. Only yesterday's *Times*. A letter tucked into its envelope, postmarked Boston. I shake my head—nothing here—and, with a slight questioning rise of my eye-brows, indicate that I will take just one step inside this bedroom—

Staring at me impassively. What is she thinking? Can she guess? The forbidden rises to one's face in the

presence of such women, they positively draw guilt out, expose everything—But though I am nervous extremely nervous, I smile rather bravely back at her—how she stands watching me!—And so I open the door to one of the bedrooms and simply lean inside—my heart is pounding—It is *his* room.

Scent of pomade. Tobacco.

For a long icy moment I stand there—my body rigid with the necessity of showing nothing, absolutely nothing, as if the hunters and their dogs will be upon me if I flinch—I feel his strange heedless presence everywhere about me, rushing upon me. So much more closer and dearer than he might ever be in his own person—

“No luck, sir?” the chambermaid calls out.

---

SATURDAY, JULY 10.

Three letters.

That dark demanding hand—not a lady’s hand—it is someone like myself, shouting at me—trying to make me hear—

A young woman and her mother brush past me with a scent of something harsh and flowery about them—my nerves are jumping—People are beginning to notice me. An elderly man is staring quite openly at me—did he write these letters?

I walk out quickly. Must be alone.

*My Dear Boy,  
Understand only that I wish you well—  
only well!—and that I should not*

SATURDAY, JULY 10.

Another sleepless, aching night. The chambermaid’s face hovering in my private darkness—witness of my folly!—this morning I will press upon her a small sum, hopefully not a bribe— or have I come to that? A gift, a sign of my gratitude for her kindness, her—

No breakfast this morning. My stomach is so weak, I am so pre-occupied . . . I am terrified. . . . Must imagine *him*. *Him*. I stand on the balcony and think of him, envision him, only him. The sea is choppy and leaden today. Everything disappoints us that is not human.

Few people strolling out. Ladies with their long dresses, so drastically

*communicate so strangely and so  
secretively if other means were open  
to me. . . .*

The last sentence is crossed out, I can't  
make out anything. No signature.

*My Dear Boy,  
You are generous to allow me to  
write, knowing that it is the only  
manner in which I may hold you  
close, lay upon you—oh, so soothingly!  
—the most respectful of hands—I see  
in your face a terrible need. I fear  
for you. Will you stand on the shore  
and accept these frail words of mine,  
will you accept the only gift I dare  
give you—words, prophecies—*

For a long moment I cannot think.  
What is happening? It is as if a secret  
self—my own self—were writing to me  
like this, hinting at a terrible knowl-  
edge—*prophecies*: what does that  
mean?—Are there spirits, ghosts? Is  
there a future self—a future Patrick  
Quarles—gazing back upon me, seeing  
me, from the future—the 1900's, when  
we may all be free!—and reaching  
back to bless me—

And so I stand on the shore, yes.  
I accept. In this dour chilling breeze  
I am very happy, and I turn slowly to  
look back at the hotel—that monster  
of a hotel!

Who is watching me?

He must be gazing at me from one  
of the windows. But I dare not wave.  
What does he think? Is he there? Is  
there really anyone there? I stare into  
space, smiling.

Across the distance something passes  
into me, like a breath.

Lighting a cigar I stroll down the  
beach and open the third letter. A

protected. Gentlemen. Hats, gloves,  
pipes. *Must imagine him. No freedom.*  
Fallen upon evil days, sick days—  
signs of devastation all around me,  
inside me—

Ah, he is there!

Wooden steps. The boardwalk. Ah,  
he is reading . . . he is reading my  
letters. . . . He is reading what I have  
written to him, in such anguish!

Disgust? Shame? Or can he sense the  
human wish behind it, the wish to  
speak kindly to another soul, a  
solitary soul. . . .?

Feverish. The wind inside my head,  
not cooling it. Wind. Fever. My  
head is swimming. He is standing  
there with his back to me—his figure  
blurs and swims in my vision—I want  
to cry out to him, “Must I grow old?  
Must I die? If you walk away from  
me I will die—”

No—he is turning—

His figure against the somber water.  
Unimagined—such splendor! He is  
looking toward me but I draw back at  
once, into the shadow of the room—  
my eyes brimming—

Across that space he seems to bless  
me. I must put my hands out against  
the French doors, I must steady  
myself or I will fling myself forward,  
outward, to my death—

Yes, he looks at me. It has happened.  
The distance between us is holy. A  
hush. . . . He is my living Self: I see  
that now. Living as I have never  
lived. He is magnificent. I am alive in

letter from a friend, one who wishes me well and knows me, knows me.

*My Dear Boy,*

*You are without history and so you must free yourself from it. But caution. Am I speaking madness? Am I offending you? Or can you understand how I should, if I dared, quite openly invite you to lean upon me as a kindly father . . . ? The sense that I cannot speak to you, cannot reveal myself to you—this torments me, makes me ache at the bitterness of things. I reach out toward you—I let you go—I abandon you—*

More words crossed out.

Something tries to come through those X-ed out words. A command. Angry urgent words. *Utter caution.* A voice has spoken. I know there are ghosts. I understand them. I feel them in this medieval town, on all sides of me, harsh and innocent with their cold piercing eyes and their victories—their terrible victories—

*I will kill him.*

No. the words are not mine. I will never lay hands upon him. The mark of my hands would show upon him, it would scream out that I was his murderer—*I will suffocate him*—I will not come near him, no. No. I will sit quietly at his bedside as he strangles in his own phlegm—the poison that bubbles up out of his ugly soul—

Will I sit at his bedside? Will I watch him die? Will I dare anything? Will I outlive him?

him and dead, dead in myself, but alive in him, only in him—

In a lifetime there are few moments of such bliss.

Trembling, hiding, in the shadows of my room . . . safe. Saved. My heart lunges backward into safety. Must hide. Must remain hidden. I am growing old, yes, soon I will be as old and as ugly as his uncle—yes, and it is right, we must be pushed aside, we must die—must acquiesce to darkness—Our heirs demand the future. They demand that history be turned over to them.

In this moment of joy I am transformed.

*He, he* is myself: walking away! Free to walk away! I must strain to see him, his handsome figure about to fade into the low-heathery bareness of the country, that shy purple and gold that runs nearly to the edge of the sea. . . .

A moment too deep for any utterance.

It takes me an hour to dress. I am shaky, yet. A little feverish. Soon I will be working again—I will work through *him*. He will possess me. I am ready to work, ready even to return to the coal-gray skies of London, that sky that encloses and entraps the mind—

He has understood my message. My love.

I hurry downstairs. I must feed the birds in the garden—I have forgotten about them for days—The garden is deserted, hushed. Everyone is elsewhere. Only *he* and I are here, our minds beating with the beauty of this sombre garden and its wide gravel paths and its pinched roses and weathered walls—

In a lifetime there are few moments  
of such bliss.

Trembling hands. The birds are  
reluctant—only sparrows—sadly,  
sullenly in the wet—Why are they  
reluctant to come to me? Starved and  
mean and yet reluctant to come  
to me?

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