I. Manhattan, 1976

The hours of coolness in the morning just before my mother died I remember for their relief. It was July and it had been warm and humid in New York City for several days, temperatures in the high eighties, the air motionless and heavy with the threat of rain.

I awoke early that morning. It was also my wife’s thirtieth birthday, but our celebration would be wan. My mother was in her last days, and the lives of all of us in the family were contorted by grief and tension—and by a flaring of anger at her cancer. We were exhausted.

I felt the coolness of the air immediately when I awoke. I walked the length of the fourth-floor apartment, opened one side of a tall casement window in the living room, and looked at the sky. Cumulus clouds, moving to the southeast on a steady wind. Ten degrees cooler than yesterday’s dawn, by the small tin thermometer. I leaned forward to rest my arms on the sill and began taking in details of movement in the street’s pale light, the city’s stirring.

In the six years I had lived in this apartment as a boy, from 1956 until 1962, I had spent cumulative months at this window. At the time, the Murray Hill section of Manhattan was mostly a neighborhood of decorous living and brownstone row houses, many of them not yet con-
verted to apartments. East 35th Street for me, a child newly arrived from California, presented an enchanting pattern of human life. Footbeat policemen began their regular patrol at eight. The delivery of residential mail occurred around nine and was followed about ten by the emergence of women on shopping errands. Young men came and went the whole day on three-wheel grocery cart bikes, either struggling with a full load up the moderate rise of Murray Hill from Gristede’s down on Third Avenue, or hurtling back the other way, driving no-hands against light traffic, cartons of empty bottles clattering explosively as the bike’s solid tires nicked potholes.

In the afternoon a dozen young girls in private-school uniforms swirled in glee and posed with exaggerated emotion across the street, waiting to be taken home. By dinnertime the street was almost empty of people; then, around eleven, it was briefly animated again with couples returning from the theater or some other entertainment. Until dawn, the pattern of glinting chrome and color in the two rows of curbed automobiles remained unchanged. And from night to night that pattern hardly varied.

Overlaying the street’s regular, diurnal rhythm was a more chaotic pattern of events, an unpredictability I would watch with unquenchable fascination for hours at a time. (A jog in the wall of The Advertising Club of New York next door made it impossible for me to see very far to the west on 35th Street. But if I leaned out as far as I dared, I could see all the way to the East River in the other direction.) I would study the flow of vehicles below: an aggressive insinuation of yellow taxis, the casual slalom of a motorcycle through lines of stalled traffic, the obstreperous lumbering of large trucks. The sidewalks, with an occasional imposing stoop jutting out, were rarely crowded, for there were neither shops nor businesses here, and few tourists. But with Yeshiva University down at the corner of Lexington, the 34th Street Armory a block away, a Swedenborgian church midblock, and 34th Precinct police headquarters just up from Third Avenue, I still saw a fair array of dress and captivating expressions of human bearing. The
tortoise pace of elderly women in drab hats paralleled the peeved ambling of a middle-aged man anxious to locate a cab. A naïf, loose-jointed in trajectory down the sidewalk, with wide-flung strides. A buttonhooking young woman, intently scanning door lintels and surreptitiously watching a building superintendent leaning sullenly against a service entrance. Two men in vested suits in conversation on the corner where, rotund and oblivious, they were a disruption, like a boulder in a creek. A boy running through red-lighted traffic with a large bouquet in his hand, held forth like a bowsprit.

All these gaits together with their kindred modulations seemed mysteriously revealing to me. Lingering couples embraced, separated with resolve, then embraced once more. People halted and turned toward each other in hilarious laughter. I watched as though I would never see such things again—screaming arguments, the otherworldly navigations of the deranged, and the haughty stride of single men dressed meticulously in evening clothes.

This pattern of traffic and people, an overlay of personality and idiosyncrasy on the day’s fixed events, fed me in a wordless way. My eyes would drift up from these patterns to follow the sky over lower Manhattan, a flock of house sparrows, scudding clouds, a distant airplane approaching La Guardia or Idlewild with impossible slowness.

Another sort of animation drew me regularly to this window: weather. The sound of thunder. Or a rising hiss over the sound of automobiles that meant the streets were wet from a silent rain. The barely audible rattle of dozens of panes of glass in the window’s leadwork—a freshening wind. A sudden dimming of sunshine in the living room. Whatever I was doing, these signals would pull me away. At night, in the isolating light cone of a streetlamp, I could see the slant, the density, and sometimes the exact size of raindrops. (None of this could I learn with my bare hands outstretched, in the penumbral dark under the building’s cornices.) I watched rainwater course east in sheets down the calico-patched street in the wake of a storm; and cascades of snow, floating and wind-driven, as varied in their character as
falls of rain, pile up in the streets. I watched the darkness between buildings burst with lightning, and I studied intently the rattle-drum of hail on car roofs.

The weather I watched from this window, no matter how wild, was always comforting. My back was to rooms secured by family life. East and west, the room shared its walls with people I imagined little different from myself. And from this window I could see a marvel as imbued with meaning for me then as a minaret—the Empire State Building. The high windows of its east wall gleamed imperially in the first rays of dawn, before the light flared down 35th Street, glinting in bits of mica in the façades of brownstones. Beneath the hammer of winter storms, the building seemed courageous and adamantine.

The morning that my mother would die I rested my forearms on the sill of the window, glad for the change of weather. I could see more of the wind, moving gray clouds, than I could feel; but I knew the walk to the subway later that morning, and the short walk up 77th Street to Lennox Hill Hospital, would be cooler.

I had been daydreaming at the window for perhaps an hour when my father came downstairs. The faint odors in the street’s air—the dampness of basements, the acrid fragrance of ailanthus trees, the aromatics in roof tar—had drawn me off into a dozen memories. My father paused, speechless, at the foot of the stairs by the dining table. As determined as he was to lead a normal life around Mother’s last days, he was at the beck and call of her disease almost as much as she was. With a high salute of his right hand, meant to demonstrate confidence, and an ironic grimace, he went out the door. Downstairs he would meet my brother, who worked with him, and together they would take a cab up to the hospital. My brother, three years younger, was worn out by these marathon days but uncomplaining, almost always calm. He and my father would eat breakfast together at the hospital and sit with Mother until Sandra and I arrived, then leave for work.

I wanted an undisturbed morning, the luxury of that kind of time,
in which to give Sandra her birthday presents, to have a conversation not shrouded by death. I made breakfast and took it into the bedroom. While we sipped coffee I offered her what I had gotten. Among other things, a fossil trilobite, symbol of longevity. But we could not break the rind of oppression this terminal disease had created.

While Sandra showered, I dressed and returned to the window. I stood there with my hands in my pockets staring at the weathered surface of the window’s wood frame, with its peeling black paint. I took in details in the pitted surface of the sandstone ledge and at its boundary, where the ledge met the color of buildings across the street. I saw the stillness of the ledge against the sluggish flow of early morning traffic and a stream of pedestrians in summer clothing below. The air above the street was a little warmer now. The wind continued to blow steadily, briskly moving cloud banks out over Brooklyn.

I felt a great affection for the city, for its tight Joseph’s coat of buildings, the vitality of its people, the enduring grace of its plane trees, and the layers of its history, all of it washed by a great tide of weather under maritime skies. Standing at the window I felt the insistence and the assurance of the city, and how I was woven in here through memory and affection.

Sandra touched my shoulder. It was time we were gone, uptown. But something stayed me. I leaned out, bracing my left palm against the window’s mullion. The color I saw in people’s clothes was now muted. Traffic and pedestrians, the start-up of myriad businesses, had stirred the night’s dust. The air was more rank with exhaust. A flock of pigeons came down the corridor of the street toward me, piebald, dove gray, white, brindled ginger, ash black—thirty or more of them. They were turning the bottom of a long parabolic arc, from which they shot up suddenly, out over Park Avenue. They reached a high, stalling apex, rolled over it, and fell off to the south, where they were cut from view by a building. A few moments later they emerged much smaller, wings pounding over brownstones below 34th Street, on a course parallel to the wind’s.

I left, leaving the window open.
When Sandra and I emerged a half-hour later from the hospital elevator, my brother was waiting to meet us. I could see by the high, wistful cast of his face that she was gone.

II. Arizona, 1954

Our train arrived at Grand Canyon Village on the South Rim late on a summer afternoon. With my brother Denny and a friend of my mother, a young woman named Ann, I had come up on the Santa Fe spur line from Williams, a town about thirty miles west of Flagstaff. We had left Los Angeles the evening before, making a rail crossing of the Sonoran Desert so magical I had fallen silent before it.

The train itself was spellbinding. I do not remember falling asleep as we crossed the desert, but I know that I must have. I only remember sitting alone in a large seat in the darkened observation car, looking at the stars and feeling nearly out of breath with fortune—being able to wander up and down the aisles of the streaking train, sitting in this observation car hour by hour staring at the desert’s sheer plain, the silhouettes of isolated mountain ranges, and, above, the huge swath of the Milky Way.

Near midnight we stopped for a few minutes in Needles, a railroad town on the lower Colorado across the river from the Fort Mojave Indian Reservation. The scene on the platform was dreamlike, increasing my sense of blessing. The temperature was over one hundred degrees, but it was a dry heat, pleasant. I had never been up this late at night. Twenty or thirty Indians—I didn’t know then, but they would have been Chemuwevis as well as Mojaves, and also Navajos, who worked on many of the Santa Fe repair crews—craned their necks, looking for disembarking passengers or cars to board. Mexican families stood tightly together, stolid, shy and alert. The way darkness crowded the platform’s pale lamplight, the way the smoky light gleamed on silver bracelets and corn-blossom necklaces, leaving its sheen on the heavy raven hair of so many women—all this so late in the
heated night made Needles seem very foreign. I wanted to stay. I could have spent all the time I had been offered at Grand Canyon right here.

But we left. I returned to my seat in the now completely empty observation car. I am sure I fell asleep shortly after we crossed the river, on the way to Kingman.

John, Ann’s husband of only a few months and a seasonal ranger at the park, met the train at the canyon. My brother and I were to have two weeks with them before Mother came up to join us. (The three of them taught together in the secondary school system in Southern California’s San Fernando Valley.)

On the way up from Williams, the train had climbed through piñon and juniper savannah. As I descended the train car’s steps, I saw fully for the first time the largest trees I had ever looked at—ponderosa pines. In the same moment, their fragrance came to me on the warm air, a sweet odor, less sharp than that of other pines.

John embraced Ann fiercely and said, “I will never be separated from you, ever again, for this long.” Their passion and his words seemed wondrous to me, profound and almost unfathomable. I stared at the huge ponderosas, which I wanted to touch.

During those two weeks, Denny and I traveled the South and East rims of the canyon with Ann while John lectured daily to visitors. The four of us lived in a small log cabin with a high-pitched roof. Sometimes I rose early, before the sun, and went outside. I would just stand in the trees or wander nearby in the first light. I could not believe the stillness.

A short distance from the cabin was a one-room museum with an office. I spent hours there, looking at pinned insects, stuffed birds, and small animals. Some of these creatures seemed incredibly exotic to me, like the Kaibab squirrel with its tufted ears—perhaps a made-up animal.

I read pamphlets about the geology of the canyon and its Indian history, and I went with my brother to some of John’s lectures. The most entrancing was one in which he described the succession of lime-
stones, sandstones, and shales that make up the visible canyon walls. The precision and orderliness of his perception, the names he gave so easily to these thousands of feet of wild, unclimbable, and completely outsized walls, seemed inspired, a way to grasp it all. I think this was the first such litany I committed to memory:

Kaibab, Toroweap,
Coconiño, Hermit;
Supai, Redwall,
Temple, Muav.
Bright Angel.
Tapeats.

On John’s days off we drove out to picnic at Shoshone Point, a place on the East Rim set aside by the Park Service for its employees. Here, far from the pressing streams of visitor traffic, the silence within the canyon reverberated like silence in the nave of a large cathedral. The small clearing with its few picnic tables was a kind of mecca, a place where the otherwise terrifying fall-off of the canyon seemed to comfort or redeem. I saw a mountain lion there one afternoon. It leaped the narrow road in one long bound, its head strangely small, its long tail strangely thick, a creature the color of Coconiño sandstone.

I did not go back to the canyon after that summer for twenty-six years. In the spring of 1980, I joined several other writers and editors at a workshop there in the Park Service’s Albright Training Center. I arrived at night by plane, so did not see much until the next morning. I got up early, just after sunrise, thinking I would walk over to the El Tovar Lodge on the rim of the canyon for breakfast. The walk, I thought, would be a way to reenter the landscape, alone and quietly, before the activities of the workshop caught me up in a flow of ideas and in protracted discussions.

I didn’t remember the area well enough that morning to know where I was, relative to the cabin we’d stayed in, but I set off through the woods toward what felt like the canyon’s rim. The gentle roll of the
land, the sponginess of ponderosa needles beneath my feet, familiar but nameless odors in the air, the soft twitter of chickadees up ahead—all this rounded into a pattern my body remembered.

At a certain point I emerged from the trees onto a macadam road, which seemed the one to take to the lodge. I’d not gone more than a few yards, however, before I was transfixed by the sight of a small building. It was boarded up, but it had once been the museum. An image of its interior formed vividly in my mind—the smooth, glass-topped display stands with bird eggs and prehistoric tools, the cabinets and drawers full of vials of seeds and insect trays.

I walked on, elated and curiously composed. I would come back.

At the foot of the road was a wide opening in the trees. Once it might have been a parking lot. I was only part-way across when I realized that the young pines growing here were actually coming up between train rails. Again I stood transfixed. It was here, all those years ago, that I had gotten off the train. I held tightly to that moment and began stepping eastward along the tracks, looking up every few steps to pure stands of ponderosa growing a hundred feet away to the south. Then I recognized a pattern in the trees, the way a dozen of the untapered, cinnamon-colored trunks stood together on a shallow slope. It had been here exactly that I had stepped off. I stared at them for many minutes, wondering more than anything at the way memory, given so little, could surge so unerringly.

I walked up to the trees and put my fingers on the bark, the large flat plates of small, concave scales. Far above, the narrow crowns were still against the bluing sky.

On the other side of the tracks I walked past the entrance to the lodge and stood at the edge of the canyon before a low, broad wall of stone. The moment my knees touched the wall, my unbounded view was shot with another memory—the feel of this stone angle against my belly when I was nine, and had had to hoist myself up onto the wall in order to see deep into the canyon. Now, I stood there long after the desire to gaze at the canyon had passed. I recalled suddenly how young ponderosas, bruised, smell like oranges. I waited, anxious, for mem-
ories that came like bursts of light: the mountain lion in its leap; the odor and jingle of harness mules and saddle horses in the hot sun at the top of Bright Angel Trail; my brother, light footed as a doe, at the wall of an Anasazi ruin. These images brought with them, even in their randomness, a reassurance about time, about the unbroken duration and continuous meaning of a single human life. With that came a sense of joy, which I took with me to breakfast.

III. Bear River, Idaho, 1991

Cort bought a potted sulfur buckwheat in the Alberton's in Jackson and he and John and I left for Idaho by way of Afton, Wyoming, passing through Montpelier and then Paris, Idaho. We turned off the main road there, drove west through Mink Creek and then Preston and swung north on US 91, crossing the bridge over Bear Creek, where we pulled off.

Cort had been here before. Neither John nor I had, but I had wanted to see the place for a long time. In this river bottom, rising away from me to the Bannock Range in the northwest and, more precipitously, to the Bear River Range behind me in the southeast, several hundred people had been violently killed on a bitter cold morning in January 1863. This obscure incident on the Bear River, once commonly called a “battle” by Western historians, has more often been referred to in recent years as a massacre, an unnecessary killing. Twenty-two men of the Second Cavalry and the Third Infantry, California Volunteers, under the command of a Col. Patrick Connor, were shot dead by Northern Shoshone. No one knows how many Shoshone were killed, but most estimate it was well over three hundred—more Indians than were killed in any other massacre in the West, including those at Sand Creek, Colorado (1864), Washita, Oklahoma (1868), or Wounded Knee, South Dakota (1890).

Connor’s stated reason for bringing three hundred troops north from Salt Lake City that winter on a forced march was to protect the Overland Mail Route. The incident that triggered his decision was the
death of a white miner in a skirmish involving several miners and Indians near Preston, a few days after Christmas, 1862. In his official report, Connor said he meant to “chastise” the Shoshone. He permitted a federal marshal to accompany him, carrying arrest warrants for three Shoshone men reputedly involved in the fatal incident with the miners, but Connor told the marshal it was not his intent to take any prisoners.

The Shoshone, 400 to 450 of them, were camped in willow thickets at the mouth of a ravine formed by Beaver Creek, several hundred yards short of its confluence with the Bear River. The spot was a traditional winter campsite, well protected from a prevailing north wind, with hot springs and with winter grazing for about two hundred horses. The night before the massacre, a man named Bear Hunter was in the nearby village of Franklin with his family, purchasing and loading sacks of wheat. He saw Connor’s troops arriving, surmised their real purpose, and brought word back to the encampment.

Early the following morning, realizing he had lost the advantage of surprise, Connor massed his cavalry openly on the south side of the river, across from the Indian camp. The temperature was probably in the low teens. Connor then waited impatiently for his infantry, which had bogged in heavy snow on the road out of Franklin.

The Shoshone were by now all awake and digging in, for Connor’s intentions had become plain. (Connor, of course, had no evidence that these particular Shoshone people had done anything wrong, only the suspicion that the men the US marshal wanted were among them.) One of the Shoshone men shouted out in perfect English, “Come on you California sons-of-bitches. We’re ready for you.” Provoked by the remark, Connor surged across the icy river and ordered the cavalry to charge. Fourteen of his soldiers were cut down almost instantly. Connor retreated to regroup and to help his foot soldiers, now arriving, get across the river.

Once they were over, Connor divided his forces, sending one column up the west slope of the ravine and another up the east slope, achieving a double flanking of the Indian camp. From these elevated
positions the soldiers raked the camp with a furious, enfilading fire. The Shoshone, lightly armed, fought back with sporadic shots and in hand-to-hand combat for three or four hours, until late in the morning, by which time most of them were dead. Connor ordered his troops to kill every wounded Indian and to set fire to all seventy tepees, scattering, burning, or fouling all the food they could find as they did so. (Historians believe as many as sixty Shoshone might have escaped, most of them by swimming the partly frozen river.) In the final stages of the fight, Shoshone women were raped. Bear Hunter was tortured to death with a white-hot bayonet.

Connor reported 224 Indians killed. Residents of Franklin, six miles away, riding through the smoldering camp and into the willow thickets the next morning, counted many more dead, including nearly one hundred women and children. They took a few survivors back, housing them and treating their injuries. Connor, who returned immediately to Salt Lake City, denounced the Mormon people of Franklin in his official report as unhelpful and ungrateful. For their part, the Mormons may only have been heedful of Brigham Young’s official policy: it was better to feed Indians than to fight with them.

John and Cort and I read in silence the historical plaques on a stone obelisk at the roadside. I felt more grief than outrage, looking across at the mouth of what is no longer called Beaver Creek but Battle Creek. An interpretive sign, erected in October 1990 by the Idaho Historical Society, seeks to correct the assumption that the fight here was a battle. It calls the encounter “a military disaster unmatched in Western history.” A 1990 National Park Service plaque, designating the undistinguished ravine across the river bottom as a National Historical Landmark, says with no apparent irony that the spot “possesses national significance in communicating the history of the United States of America.”

We left the highway, drove up a dirt road, and parked at the site of the encampment, which is not signed or marked. Where the Shoshone tepees once stood, in fact, the creek is now clogged with debris
and refuse—a school locker, a refrigerator, a mattress, scorched magazines and tin cans, lawn furniture riddled with bullet holes. Violet-green swallows swooped the muddy water, only eight or ten feet across. On what is today called Cedar Bluff—the west side of the ravine—an iron-wheel combine and a walking-beam plow stood inert in sage and buckbrush. Overhead we heard the mewing of Franklin’s gulls. From bottom flats near the river came the lowing of beef cattle.

Cort took the sulfur buckwheat from the truck, and the three of us started up the east side of the creek. The ravine, crisscrossed with horse and cattle tracks, was badly eroded. A variety of exotic grasses barely held in place a fine, pale tan, friable soil. Suddenly we saw a red fox. Then a muskrat in the water. Then the first of nine beaver dams, each built with marginal materials—teasel stalks and shreds of buckbrush, along with willow sticks and a few locust limbs. As we moved farther up the creek we heard yellow-headed blackbirds and mourning doves. In the slack water behind each succeeding dam, the water appeared heavier—silt was settling out before the water flowed on to the next dam, a hundred feet or so downstream. The beaver were clarifying the watercourse.

We finally found a small, open point of land near the creek. Cort put the buckwheat down and began to dig. He meant the planting as a simple gesture of respect. When he finished, I filled a boot with water and came back up the steep embankment. I poured it through my fingers, slowly, watching the small yellow flowers teeter in the warm air. Cort had gone on up the creek, but I met John’s eye. He raised his eyebrow in acknowledgment, but he was preoccupied with his own thoughts and stepped away.

I climbed to the top of the ravine on the east side and walked north until I came to a high bluff above the creek where hundreds of bank swallows were nesting. I sat watching them while I waited for my friends to emerge from the willow thickets below. A few months before, Cort had lent me his copy of Newall Hart’s scarce history, *The Bear River Massacre*, which contains reproductions of military reports and other primary materials. He recommended I read Brigham Madsen’s
The Shoshoni Frontier and the Bear River Massacre. Cort himself had written about the incident in his Idaho for the Curious. When he and John joined me, Cort said he wanted to cross the creek and look over a section of Cedar Bluff he'd not walked on an earlier visit. I wanted to watch the swallows a while longer. John essayed another plan, and we each went our way again.

I worked back south along the creek bottom, pausing for long moments to watch for beaver, which I did not see. Frogs croaked. I came on mule-deer tracks. The warm air, laced with creek-bottom odors, was making me drowsy. I climbed back to the top of the ravine at the place where we had planted the buckwheat. A road there paralleled the creek, and its two tracks were littered with spent 12-gauge shotgun shells, empty boxes of .308 Winchester ammunition, and broken lengths of PVC pipe. I followed a barb-wire fence past a bathtub stock tank to the place where we'd parked.

I opened Hart's book on the hood of the truck. Tipped against the back endsheet is a large, folded plat map of the "Connor Battle Field," made in 1926 by W. K. Aiken, the surveyor of Franklin County, Idaho. I oriented it in front of me and began matching its detail to the landscape—Aiken's elevations, the sketchy suggestion of an early road to Montana, and a spot to the south where Aiken thought Connor had caught his first glimpse of the Shoshone encampment that morning. In the upper-right corner of his map Mr. Aiken had written, not so cryptically, "Not a Sparrow Falls."

The river's meander had since carried it nearly three-quarters of a mile to the south side of its flood plain. Otherwise the land—ranched and planted mostly to hay crops, dotted with farm houses and outbuildings, and divided by wire fences—did not, I thought, look so very different. You could see the cattle, and you could smell pigs faintly in the air.

John came back. He took a bird guide out of the truck and began slowly to page through it. Cort returned with the lower jaw of a young mule deer, which we took as a souvenir. We drove back out to the road and headed north for Pocatello.
IV. Southern California, 1988

Sandra and I were in Whittier, California, for a ceremony at the town’s college. It was the sort of day one rarely sees in the Los Angeles basin anymore: the air gin-clear, with fresh, balmy winds swirling through the eucalyptus trees, trailing their aromatic odor. The transparency of the air, with a trace of the Pacific in it, was intoxicating.

As we left the campus, Sandra said she could understand now what I meant about the sunlight, the clear air of my childhood.

“Yes,” I answered. “It was like this often in the spring, after the rains in February. Back then—well, it was a long time ago. Thirty years, thirty-five years ago.”

It was obvious anyway, she said, how this kind of light had affected the way I saw things.

I told her something Wallace Stegner wrote: whatever landscape a child is exposed to early on, that will be the sort of gauze through which he or she will see all the world afterward. I said I thought it was emotional sight, not strictly a physical thing.

The spanking freshness of the afternoon encouraged a long drive. I asked Sandra if she wanted to go out to Reseda, where our family had lived in several houses, starting in 1948.

In November 1985 I had come down to Los Angeles from my home in Oregon. I was meeting a photographer who lived there, and with whom I was working on a story about the California desert for National Geographic. Flying into Los Angeles usually made me melancholy—and indignant. What I remembered from my childhood here, especially a rural countryside of farms and orchards out toward Canoga Park and Granada Hills, was not merely “gone.” It had been obliterated, as if by a kind of warfare, and the remnant earth dimmed beneath a hideous pall of brown air.

A conversation with people in Los Angeles about these changes never soothes anyone. It only leaves a kind of sourness and creates impedance between people, like radio static. On the way to eat dinner
with my friend, ruminating nevertheless in a silent funk about the place, I suddenly and vividly saw a photograph in my mind. It was of a young boy, riding the cantilevered support of a mailbox like a horse. On the side of the mailbox was "5837." I wrote the numerals down on the edge of a newspaper in my lap. I was not sure what they meant, but I recognized the boy as myself.

During dinner, I just as suddenly remembered the words "Wilbur Avenue," a street in Reseda. We had lived in three different houses in that town, the last one on Calvert Street. I had visited it several times in the intervening years, but hadn’t been able to remember where the other two houses were.

The next day I rented a car and drove out to the Calvert Street home. Some thirty citrus and fruit trees my brother and I had planted in the mid-fifties had been dug out, and the lot had been divided to accommodate a second house, but parts of the lawn we had so diligently watered and weeded were still growing. I had raised tumbler pigeons here, and had had my first dog, a Kerry Blue terrier.

I inquired at a gas station on Victory Boulevard and found I was only a few blocks from crossing Wilbur Avenue. I made the turn there but saw the house numbers were in the six thousands and climbing; coming back the other way, I pulled up tentatively in front of 5837. I got out slowly, stared at the ranch-style house, and was suffused with a feeling, more emotion than knowledge, that this had been my home. Oleander bushes that had once shielded the house from the road were gone, along with a white rail fence and about fifteen feet of the front yard. In the late forties, before flood-control projects altered the drainage of this part of the San Fernando Valley, Wilbur Avenue had been a two-lane road with high, paved berms meant to channel flood water north to the Los Angeles River. In those days it also served as a corridor for sheep being moved to pasture. Now it was four lanes wide, with modest curbs.

One walnut tree remained in the yard, and a grapefruit tree closer to the house. I glimpsed part of the backyard through a breezeway but kept moving toward the front door, to knock and introduce myself.
There was no answer. I waited awhile and knocked again. When no one answered I walked around to the breezeway, where there was a kitchen door. I nearly collided with a small, elderly woman whose hands flew up involuntarily in defense. I quickly gave my name, explaining I had grown up here, that I only wished to look around a little, if I could. Fright still gripped her face.

“Do you know,” I said to her, “how, from the family room, you have to take that odd step up to the hallway, where the bedrooms are?”

Her face relaxed. She waved off her anxiousness, seemingly chagrined. She explained that the owner of the house, a woman named Mrs. Little, was inside, dying of cancer. I remembered the name. She had lived out near Palmdale when we rented the house. I said that I was sorry, that there was no need for me to go inside.

“Well, please, have a look around,” she said. She was relaxed now, serene, acting as though we were distant relatives. She walked into the backyard with me. At nearly each step, having difficulty stemming the pressure of memories, I blurted something—about a tree, about a cinderblock wall (still unfinished) around a patio. I pointed to some aging apricot and grapefruit trees, and to a massive walnut tree. We were standing on a concrete path, where I squatted down to peer at a column of ants going in and out of a crack. I had watched ants in this same crack forty years before. These were their progeny, still gathering food here. The mystery of their life, which had once transfixed me, seemed in no way to have diminished. I felt tears brim under my eyes and spill onto my cheeks. The woman touched my forearm deliberately but lightly, and walked away.

The horse stalls, a barn, and a row of chicken coops were gone, but I found scraps of green rolled roofing and splinters of framing lumber from them in the tall grass. I remembered mischief I had created here as a five-year-old. And then, like a series of sudden inflorescences, came memories first of the texture of tomatoes I had raised in a garden beside the chicken coops, and then of the sound of bees—how my friends and I had dared each other to walk past a hive of feral honeybees behind the barn where it ran close to the back fence.
Tempted to pick apricots and a grapefruit, I decided I had no right to do so. I said goodbye to the woman and asked her to convey my good wishes to Mrs. Little, whom I could not think would remember me.

Driving straight from the house to Anza-Borrego State Park in the western Sonoran Desert, a hundred and fifty miles away, I felt a transcendent calm. I promised myself I would return and try to find the first house, the location of which was lost to me.

Sandra and I came over from Whittier on the freeways, turning north off the Ventura onto Reseda Boulevard, then cutting over to Wilbur, which ran parallel. The house could not hold for her what it held for me, and I felt selfish using our time like this. But I wanted to share the good feeling I had had. The neighborhood still has about it something of the atmosphere of a much older San Fernando Valley—a bit rundown, but with no large housing developments, no landscaped and overwatered lawns. I drove past the house and had to turn and come back. The mailbox with its numbers was gone. The lot was empty: the house and all the trees had been razed; the bare, packed, red-brown earth had been swept clean. Only the tread marks of a single tractor were apparent, where it had turned on soft ground.

I got out of the car and walked back and forth across the lot, silently. On the ground near a neighbor’s cinder-block fence I saw an apricot pit. I put it in my pocket.

"I’ve been thinking," I said to Sandra, once I was standing beside the car again. "The first house may have been way out on Wilbur, toward the Santa Susannas." She looked off that way.

"Would you mind driving? That way I could look. I might get the pattern of something, the way it looked."

"Yes," she said. "Certainly."

We turned around and headed north on Wilbur, windows open to the fresh breeze. We drove past the house where my friend Leon had lived, where I had first bitten into the flesh of a pomegranate, and then slowly past other places that I knew but which I could not recognize. The air all around was brilliant.