

## Eyes, Ears, Noses

DO YOU KNOW the sounds of people dying? I don't mean the grand gestures of movies or imagination, the gasps and the aaahs. I mean the little sounds, the syncopated breathing that is more of the dead than the living, the noises of trapped saliva, the hisses of lungs that cannot expand beyond a certain point of pain. They are infinite, these sounds, but only an unencumbered ear can hear them. We have been made dull in our hearing. Perhaps that is why we cannot wiggle our ears any longer. If we could hear, our ears would be *alive* with movement, filtering a thousand sounds of life and death. The same is true of our noses. We have ceased to smell reality, the smells of love, of joy, of fear, of death. For example, sweat alone can reveal any of these qualities to us. Put them together, combine them with our eyes (particularly to see others' eyes), and there is a formidable apparatus for receiving life. I myself have been unbearably lucky in these respects. I was born with the gift to perceive, and I have kept my gift pure. My wife, for example, she is dying. She does not know it yet. No doctor has told her anything. She might last a good many years. But she is dying. I *perceive* it. Her breathing is subtly off. She has smells that sometimes completely turn off my desire to make love to her, particularly in the morning, when her body exudes her most natural smells, uncontaminated by the activities of the day and amenities of civilization. One does not usually want to make love to a moribund thing. And she senses my knowledge, she sees it particularly in my eyes, though she would never admit it to herself. Sometimes I cannot bear the knowing and the waiting. It would be too cruel to tell her. And my son, he lives in abject fear. The essence of him is fear. Why, I do not know. Perhaps, in some way, he too senses her dying, and he is bereft already. His sweat, his urine, his tears, all smell of fear. He quivers continuously, but so imperceptibly that no one can see it. He will wear himself out with his fear and live in a closet, his heart ready to burst. I feel sympathy for him and try to help him. I joke loudly with him, laugh a lot, and slap him on the back. But all that only increases his fear. Every time he sees me it is as if I had leapt out of a box. He looks on the verge of collapse. Of course sometimes it is too much, it irritates me. Sometimes when I see him and his mother cowering in each other's arms I feel like yelling at them, "Oh, die, you weaklings!" But I forbear. I am very conscious of my good fortune, my superior senses. I cultivate patience and compassion. My friends and acquaintances are also aware of my superiority. That is why they shun me. They are afraid. I am a mirror to their unrecognized, unspoken anxieties. In me they see the unseeable. But how ridiculous. How petty. Would we not all be better off with the truth? Should we not all live with courage? After all, there is joy, too. Is that not compensation enough? I make it a point each day to walk in the midst of nature. There I find no dishonest fear, there

there is no sniveling. *There* is truth and life and death and beauty. I breathe in, I smell the flowers and the grass and the trees. I feel the wind and the sun. I see the infinity of color. What a joy it all is. How I would like to strip my son naked and have him run there. Poor, timid creature, he would probably die. Perhaps it would be for the best.