

## Life in the Temperate Zone · Robert Wexelblatt

### I. THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

I enjoy thinking, though in a dilettantish way and in small doses. For me, thinking is like *solitaire*, except that I dislike taking its rules seriously. In this I am probably typical of my generation and socio-political coordinates. Of course, it would be a vast encouragement if rigorous thinking could bring one to the truth, but I do not really believe it. In my experience, belief operates along a line virtually parallel to that of thought, and what is meant by truth is a matter of belief rather than a product of thinking. These days, moreover, belief is a matter of feeling, even of mood. People say “I feel that” more frequently than “I think that” or even “I believe.” It is nicely irresponsible of them, noncommittal. Not *credo*, but *sento*.

Have you ever noticed that your thinking is in some respects a function of what you happen to be doing while thinking? For example, no one thinks about the same things while painting a ceiling as they do while taking out the garbage. *Nihil humanum a me alienum puto*, a Latin tag which I have only just thought of during this quiet, philosophical moment at my desk, would never intrude on my consciousness if I were hurrying to catch the start of a movie. The formula for determining the area of obtuse triangles has never occurred to me in the course of telephone conversations, even the most obtuse ones. Conversely, I find pleasant memories are thought about best when listening to music, since music, rather like nostalgia, is an incarnation of the past that can be performed only in the present. Fine points of law—indeed, any delicate distinctions—are weighed best while sitting up straight, erotic fantasies while reclining, metaphysical speculations while smoking, and current events while eating. *Etcetera*.

But all of this is only by way of introducing one particular kind of thinking, something I do in cars, especially when driving goodly distances alone. I think out these little stories. What gives these stories the cast of thought is that they seem to waft out from hypothetical ideas as seeds do from dandelions. The hypotheses themselves, also like dandelions, arise of their own accord, or perhaps through the steering column. Most of these anecdotes fall on the stoniest of ground, long-distance ennui, but some are

interesting enough to last a full ten or twenty miles, after which they peter out and are replaced by others, the radio, vacuity, the actuality of traffic.

Several of these anecdotes, complete with titles, occurred to me during my recent journey to attend my niece's high school graduation, a trip of about three hours. It was a long three hours, though only a short visit.

## 2. A LIFE IN THE TEMPERATE ZONE (I)

Gerald McCormack, full professor at Columbia University, became famous because he sacrificed his life—in a manner of speaking—to scholarship.

As a graduate student of anthropology in the early 1960s, Gerald ran into a problem. He wished fervently to do original field research, having been inspired to study anthropology by the richly adventurous accounts of the discipline's founding fathers and mothers; however, he was unable to discover any primitive cultures or even small isolated tribes which had not already been studied. His dissertation advisor smiled when Gerald despondently reported this failure to him.

"Hardly a new problem, McCormack. Why do you think urban anthropology was invented?"

Taking the hint, Gerald diligently searched through the literature but, once again, could find nothing truly original left to do. It had taken nearly a half a century to use up all the islands and jungles, but apparently a mere twenty years to dispose of the cities, with all their neighborhoods and social classes. At their second interview, Gerald's advisor frowned.

"There is perpetually useful work to do, McCormack," he said censoriously. "The pioneers always leave nooks and crannies for graduate students like you. Then there is the continual task of synthesis, and, even beyond that, the vast enterprise of theory, which is of course never ending."

After all, the advisor was himself a synthetic theorist who had, years before, done his own thesis on certain neglected aspects of the Swat Pathan potlatch.

Gerald, however, was a young man with a vocation and not one to be satisfied with the derivative or the abstract. So, much to his advisor's disgust, he left the university and answered a large corporation's advertisement for management trainees. Gerald had a plan of his own.

### 3. ADVENTURES IN SECULAR HUMANISM

Nobody thinks I have any problems, and do you know why? Oh, it's so unfair. It's all because it looks like I have just everything. My mother and father aren't divorced and we live in this nice house and have enough money and I've got, I suppose, plenty of clothes and I'm popular at school and my grades are okay and I got into my second choice. So you can see what it's like—I never get any sympathy. You've got to be practically starving before anybody has any sympathy with you, or a cripple or something. Like the other night. I was out at Katy's and we kind of lost track of the time, you know, so Bill got me back at 2:30 and the next morning my mother starts yelling at me as soon as I get up and then—get this—she grounds me. Grounds me for being all of about an hour late. I hate her. God, who else still has a curfew anyhow? I really hate her. Then the next day, you know, Saturday—naturally I'm not talking to her—she gets this back thing of hers and stays in bed practically all day and complains when I don't take Pebbles out. Like it's my job or something. Same with the cleaning. God, I vacuumed all over the house for her but she complains I didn't dust. Who dusts? I swear, she's compulsive and she just hates me anyway. Daddy calls her the Driver, you know, because she's just impossible in the car. Know what I mean? I just won't drive anywhere with her anymore, I really won't. What's she want from me? She screams these names at me, you know. Her favorite thing to call me is spoiled. Oh, I hate that. Spoiled. All she wants is for me to feel guilty. But I figure like if I am spoiled, then whose fault is it anyhow? Like the other night—you know when she had the back thing—she calls me spoiled and tells Daddy how I wouldn't lift a finger to help her all day and I went to my room and called up Bill and then she barges in—that's right, right into my room—and tells me to get off the phone. She says the bills are too high. And then, just for spite, she takes away my cable thing—you know, the clicker—so there's just nothing to do. I have to sit here and all weekend it's young lady this and young lady that. I tell you, Marsha, I can't wait to get out of this place. If you want to know what I think, I think deep down she's, like, you know, jealous. Take the prom. Three guys asked me besides Bill you know—that's right, Steve, and Keith, and that nerd, Robby Paisiello. I don't know where he got the nerve—imagine, Sobby Robby, the drip. Anyway, suddenly she gets all sympathetic and involved, you know, and wants to like help with my dress and stuff. . . . Oh, wait a minute, it's Call Waiting. Can I phone you back? It's probably Billy. Okay . . . ?

#### 4. THE ESSENTIAL BRAM STOKER

Richard Lapidus is worth upward of two hundred million dollars and his ex-wife is still the town pump. Though she is pathetic now and overweight, she still is in possession of her beautiful soprano, her fine skin, custody of the children, and their last house. But there is no denying that she has become a bloated argosy and a slob. Richard is in athletic trim and lives in an atmosphere of furniture advertisements. Lapidus wisely got the two hundred million only after the sloppy divorce by buying a baby-minded inventor's patent on a small computer-linking device. He then mass-produced the device at a remarkably low cost in an oriental milieu and it sold so well that he now has become a man almost literally made of money. And that is how he appears to think of himself; it is how he looks at his hands and feet. Richard loves being so rich; he enjoys committing—quite consciously, I believe—the vulgarities of a parvenu, not excluding the kind of gratuitous paternalistic charity that gives fortunes their public gleam. The device and the divorce changed his life within a year and now he smiles even when he is describing his depression.

Richard has three girlfriends now, which is down quite a bit from a few months ago. Two of them are actually airline stewardesses; the other works at a television station handling their advertising sales. One of the stewardesses is blonde, like the television executive; the remaining stewardess has very black, very long hair. It is taken for granted that all three would like to marry Richard. Richard is forty-six, growing worried and even wearied, but he is both sybaritic and cautious, as if the positive and deliberately irresponsible pursuit of pleasure were by far the safest philosophy. The average age of the three girlfriends is exactly thirty-three years and four months. They are worried and wearied too. Indeed, everyone is afraid of being fifty and alone, sixty and forgotten, seventy and sick.

Richard's particular problem today is that all three women are accidentally in town at the same time and two of them know about the graduation party at the McCormacks' house. All three have had a dinner at the McCormacks' house because the McCormacks are Richard's best friends. They helped him through his divorce and through the lean years before the device. Gerald spent evening after evening with him, talking, listening, advising, nodding, sympathizing, counseling. Virginia cooked him large meals and took an interest in every new purchase, every long weekend, every boarding or military school to which he or his ex-wife

thought of sending their son Seth. Seth, incidentally, is old enough to envy his father. He has an unlimited interest in female anatomy and would very much enjoy spending a weekend with any one of the three girlfriends. Seth is also the only semi-friend of the McCormacks' son. This friendship is entirely false and based on a squalid symbiosis. There is no sincerity in it, as there probably is in the parents' friendship, but rather supposed dominance on Seth's side and what I take to be lonely or bemused curiosity on the inscrutable Bruce's. That is my opinion anyway. Everyone else seems to believe the boys are genuine pals, and Virginia is overwhelmed with gratitude that this noisy and shallow boy should have befriended her son, whom she utterly misunderstands.

The three girlfriends with whom Richard has been feverishly enjoying and revenging himself are, alas, merely the shapely stuff of comedy. He is made of money, after all, so everything will play itself out on a plane of assurance, will work out—if not exactly for the best—then at least innocuously. Richard's somewhat televised life is, I think, Virginia's substitute for soap operas. Such stories never end; they only get cancelled once in a while.

## 5. AUTUMN ON THE AMAZON

My parents long ago decided I am slow, that there is something the matter with me. Good. They are both right and wrong: there *is* something the matter with me, but, so far as I can see, I am not slow. I am not nearly so stupid as most of the people I've met, anyhow. *Reluctant* would be a better word; perhaps it is not in the vocabulary of Dr. Blitzstein, who is one of the stupidest people of all. Still, it suits me very well to be considered slow. Others believe what my parents tell them, so my reluctance is virtually a disguise, a kind of protective coloration. The smaller mammals have the right idea. Don't fight the big predators—be invisible, outwit them. Above all forget about your dignity. Rodents which aspire to dignity make main courses; the pretentious ones are hors d'oeuvres. No, it is not supposing too much to say that appearing slow has saved me. The difficult thing is not knowing what it has saved me from—I can see that all around me in this place—but what it has saved me for. That is the great mystery of my life so far. In any case, my mask has certainly cleared a nice space around me. In this space I am able to breathe freely. Believing I have no intellect or perception, people not only don't bother about what I am

thinking, they reveal themselves almost wantonly. I can look inward and I can look outward because nobody guesses that I see anything. I am safe. I am no threat. But the result is that I am full of secrets, like a spy whose big wondering eyes look naive enough, but who understands everything and remembers it to boot. I am a small mammal with big eyes and little to say, like my most distant ancestors.

Once in a while, I almost believe my father knows and this is for an odd reason. It's because, at certain uncanny moments, I can't help feeling he's doing the same thing—pretending, that is. He has this peculiar smile when he thinks nobody's looking. Outside of such instants, however, he is what my sister calls terminally normal. Who knows? Maybe that's *his* disguise. More likely, I am doing what Blitzstein called projecting. Of course, he didn't use such a long and technical term with me (I am slow), but I overheard him explaining me to my mother. It was hard to keep a straight, slow face.

There is no autumn on the Amazon, but you can imagine one: huge orange leaves overhanging a brown, unfathomable river, snakes slow in the chilling air, a hint of frost hovering over the rain-forest. I am like that, an imaginary season in a real place, or a real season in an imaginary place.

Speaking of imaginary seasons and places, my uncle is coming for the graduation today. He interests and worries me; I can't figure him out; he is opaque. I like him, but I won't talk with him because the things he says to me are too sharp. I have the feeling that he could look through me if he cared to, but that he doesn't care to. That rather hurts, though it is odd I should feel it when so much of my energy is used up avoiding just such discovery. When I was younger he would tell me stories when he visited. In one story there was a boy who hated his body and couldn't accept that he *was* his body. At first he tried everything he could think of to get out of it, like running very fast or breaking mirrors. Then the boy tried to change his body to what he felt it ought to be. He did push-ups, drank milkshakes, had his hair cut and styled. He attempted to imagine himself into the proper shape. He tried to make his face look on the outside what it looked like to him on the inside. People became exasperated with him because of this obsession, so he was very lonely. Obviously, this story made me nervous, young as I was. But my uncle gave it a happy ending. The boy grew up to become a great actor, famous for his ability to look different in each of his many roles. My uncle said the actor's choice is not to be *or*

not to be, but to be *and* not to be. He said the boy's secrets were sympathy and self-forgetfulness.

My uncle's an oddball. Summer in Antarctica? There is no danger greater than that posed by a kindred spirit.

## 6. A LIFE IN THE TEMPERATE ZONE (II)

Virginia met Gerald when her brother Henry brought him home one weekend expressing the opinion that the two were bound to like one another for reasons of which he was convinced but found superfluous to enumerate. This was an ordinary enough way for a young couple to meet, but Gerald and Henry had met in a more remarkable fashion.

Quite independently, they had both bought tickets to see the same off-beat play on the same June evening. The experimental play was rather unpleasantly called "Detached Retinas." It was chockful of menace; a none-too-vague threat of physical violence was directed throughout at the small audience. The audience was, in effect, the play's ruling symbol, constituting not only the "detached retinas" of the title, but, by the quick metonymy of the time, a corrupt, impotent government and a mean-spirited, philistine and pathological society. The high point of the piece was the monologue of a good-looking young actress (one had the sense that she was there to rebel against her pleasant, privileged childhood) who pretended to be old, blind, disabled, and ethnically in the minority. The speech ended with the actress stripping to show the beauty underlying each skin—no matter how aged, no matter what color. There was even some genuine exhortation directed at the first couple rows of seats just prior to the manifestation of all this beauty. Only Gerald and Henry stayed to the end. Both applauded politely, walked to the subway afterwards, waited for the same northbound train, entered the same car, held on to the same pole. In the subway car was a genuine old woman. She was not black, but she may possibly have been disabled. Two juvenile white delinquents got on loudly at the third stop. They made the sounds of a rock rhythm-section. First one, then both began to abuse this old woman, who stared straight ahead, perhaps blindly, perhaps in terror. When the train stopped at the next station Gerald and Henry looked at one another for the first time, nodded, smiled, and counted to five. Then they threw the punks bodily out of the car just before the doors shut and it rushed from the station.

Given all this, it seemed only natural to Henry that, as he had a sister, he and Gerald were destined to become brothers-in-law.

Gerald married Virginia about a year later. He was moving up nicely at the large corporation and he already was two years into a mortgage on a split-level house in the suburbs. His neighbors were very glad when he married; it troubled them profoundly that a single man should live in a house that was so obviously intended for a family. Marriage to Virginia or anyone else was certainly not part of Gerald's original plan, but he was nonetheless very happy about it. Besides, in addition to his love for Virginia and his attachment to her brother, the marriage actually did much to advance and deepen his work, though it also complicated this work, placing colossal and unprecedented demands on his reserves of objectivity.

After the wedding, Gerald kept his notes, which his marriage did so much to amplify, under lock and key. That was the least of the necessary adjustments.

## 7. HOUND'S-TOOTH NUNS

Virginia's brief affair with the thieving son of a local contractor shocked her so much that to this day she will not talk about or acknowledge it. On those rare occasions when, for historiographic reasons, the topic is utterly unavoidable, she will invent vague euphemisms (e.g., "five years ago" — not even "what happened five years ago"). Mostly she denies, represses, ignores, overlooks, and forgets.

The affair began for a reason which is not so trivial as at first appears. Gerald dislikes going to restaurants whereas Virginia adores eating out. Worse yet, in his line of work Gerald frequently must eat in restaurants — often quite famous ones — while Virginia, by the nature of things, used to be tied to her house. This was in the antediluvian days when people still used the Prussian-sounding word, "homemaker." After the birth of their second child they had moved into their second house, a very grand affair with skylights and decks and play and powder rooms, gadgets and mod cons galore. It is, indeed, so wonderful and complicated an establishment (though not easily distinguishable from the ones surrounding it) that something is always wrong with it: insects are devouring the deck, the oven-fan is on the fritz, the skylights are leaking like portholes on the *Lusitania*.

Now Gerald, sincerely or otherwise, stood on his rights most of the



time and categorically refused to go out to eat. Virginia, who understood their contract in her own way, insisted on Gerald's weekly obligation to "show her a good time," as she put it. Of course, as in all real marriages, this sit com was merely the tip of a well submerged iceberg — two of them, in fact. Gerald's objection to restaurants was really based on an aversion to being waited on. This went back to his childhood, which was a pampered one, until his parents went down with an Electra in New York harbor during his sixteenth year, leaving enough money for tuition and the split-level house in the suburbs. Virginia could not complain, like her friends, that her husband did not help around the house or with the kids, could not cook for himself, insisted on her doing everything for him. After all, he even did his own ironing, sewed on his own buttons. He did not even object to her hiring a cleaning woman, though on condition that the woman would only appear while he was at work.

For her part, Virginia was radically discontent. She was midway between thirty and forty, a dangerous age for any woman subliminally educated to believe that her life will essentially end with her fourth decade. And then there was Barbara, her best friend, and Anne, her worst enemy. Barbara had separated sadly from Eddie, but after a couple of morose and whining months had begun to date men who were themselves separated or divorced. Anne, whom Virginia detested, had for that very reason enormous authority for her. Indeed, Virginia's hatred of Anne was nothing but uneasy envy — the sort mothers and housewives generally feel toward successful and resolutely happy career women who joyfully proclaim their triumphs, mercantile and amatory.

The contractor's thieving son was practiced and smooth. On the day he came to fix the skylights he did not allow himself any crude passes. He was respectful, he played innocent, he joked around, he told a few melancholy details about himself in an *entre-nous* spirit, he offered some timid compliments. He left the job incomplete so that he could return the next day, too. On this occasion he suggested they might perhaps meet for a drink some time — you know, while she was at a loose end and he was on a lunch break.

Three months later Virginia convinced Gerald to loan the contractor's thieving son twenty thousand dollars. She was going to start a florist shop with him; after all, the children no longer needed her at home, not even Bruce, who was slow but hardly irresponsible.

Gerald took notes with mixed feelings all the way through to the catastrophe, which anyone could have foreseen. He missed nothing, except the twenty-grand.

#### 8. GRADUS AD PARNASSUM, PUER

Wow, have I written a wicked set of verses! But what should I do with them? Why did I write them? They could easily be taken amiss—in fact, there is no other way to take them—and they could definitely blow my cover. Still, I would like to show them to someone. Certainly not Sillary Hilary, and surely not that phoney-baloney Seth, either. No, there is only one person to whom I could show my little poem, and he is the riskiest reader of all. The risk itself is alluring.

It was after midnight. I was smoking a Marlboro in my locked room. Everyone was asleep, something which always gives me a powerful feeling of freedom. I sat by the open window, blowing smoke at the trees, the Mullins' house, the heated garages and fertilized lawns. I thought of the vast system of food distribution, electrical grids, the malls, commuter trains, air-conditioning ducts. I thought of the high school, all dark and implacable with its Olympic-sized swimming pool, huge parking lot, and scent of terror—poetic indeed. Of course I thought of Seth's delicious sow of a mother with her juicy and heartbreaking voice, of the crushing normality of this banal and expensive way of living. I thought of Bill's hearty family with their good teeth and blond hair, so briefly fond of their new German car. Home entertainment units. Toys. Golf clubs. Diplomas framed on panelled walls. Cruises in February. Shopping, shopping, shopping. Then I somehow wrote my wicked, wicked verses. They came as if from dictation. Uncle Henry would appreciate them, I'm afraid. Ladies and gentlemen:

Glittering water, wandering jews,  
A big-breasted daughter, mulligan stews,  
Odor of camphor, a rattling screen door,  
A friend down in Stamford, a colossal bore,  
Scotch that's worth money, Danish herring in sauce,  
Most days are sunny, most evenings a loss,  
Cool breezes at midnight, breakfast with toast,  
Green salts in the firelight, five bills in the post,

Joy on the hammock, lethargic in bed,  
Eats broiled haddock, but eats it with dread,  
Concerned about ulcers, dreams of the sea,  
Learned about pulsars on public tv,  
Writes loads of checks, but seldom a letter,  
Troubled by sex, thinks it should be better,  
Is good to the kids, rather less to the wife,  
Too high with his bids, but then bridge isn't life.

Green Mercedes-Benz, bright henna toenails,  
Contemns her best friends, whose hips are like whales',  
Glow through the mall, in restaurants commanding,  
Pads down the hall, shouts from the landing,  
Knows what to do both at wedding and wake,  
When to wear blue, when to offer sponge cake,  
Reads quite a lot, got straight A's in college,  
Yet who cares a jot for all of her knowledge?  
Religion's support, of culture a fan,  
Loves a resort, barely tolerates man,  
Fights ennui, a gifted consumer,  
Happy is she whose breast hides no tumor,  
Her figure holds still, though, it's not quite firm,  
Regrets that the Pill hadn't spared her from sperm,  
Her girl will succeed, and her kitchen's electric,  
Takes lovers on need, she's not loose but eclectic.

Do these lines prove I am so far from being slow that I am precocious?  
Have I lost my so-called innocence? Am I truly a spy?

No, the verses are not really any good, but they are cynical and observant. Can one be observant and not cynical? I shall someday have to ask Uncle H., but for now I shall do with these verses what people do with most candid snapshots. I still await my vocation.

#### 9. CARPATHIAN COMEDY

Five cars stood shining in the driveway: Virginia's, Gerald's, Hilary's (a graduation gift), and two more. Every one of them was brand new, glittering like a jewel against the foil of the lawn. I pulled up on the gravel,

took a deep breath, grinned into the mirror, headed for the front door.

At the moment I arrived, Richard Lapidus was seated in the living room drinking a bloody mary with a piece of lime in it and trying out lies on Gerald.

"I can tell Marlene and Sheila that my mother's sick and pick Meredith up after the ceremony. Or I can bring Meredith to the party, tell Sheila I have an emergency meeting and that I'll meet her for dinner and, I don't know, maybe have Marlene fly up to my place in the mountains or something."

Gerald rose from the deep couch of the conversation pit to greet me. The phone rang twice in the distance, pinball noises rose from the playroom below. My nephew, who had opened the door for me and had pretended he was not pleased to see me, must have returned to the lower depths. "My mother and sister are getting dressed; Dad's in the living room." A good act.

"Great to see you, Hank," said Gerald, perhaps acting, perhaps not. "You remember Richard, of course."

"Oh, of course. Hi there, Richard," I said breezily, fully aware of what sort of drama I had entered.

"Hello." Richard was opulently glum and overdressed.

Virginia came in wearing a robe and a droll smile. "Henry! You're here!" She gave me a quick kiss that avoided spoiling her makeup, and turned to Lapidus. "That was Marlene on the phone," she announced.

"Oh God, you didn't tell her I was here, did you?"

"No, but it doesn't much matter. She said she was taking a cab and should be here herself in about forty minutes."

"Oops," mumbled Richard.

Gerald sat down and laid out the situation for me.

"Well," I said, tapping my fingers together like a surgeon, "it seems to me, Dick, that this game can only be properly played if you contrive to see all three of them today. Anything else would be like cheating at solitaire. It's a challenge."

I could see Richard liked my spirit. He was not without resources, after all, and hardly one to shrug off a challenge.

"It's pretty complicated," he offered with an intrigued grin.

"But not insoluble," I observed with a raised finger.

Gerald winked at me. "If Marlene will be here in forty minutes, she can

come to the graduation with us.”

“Try and stop her,” said Richard.

“Fine,” I said. “Then that takes care of her. All you have to do is get rid of her after the ceremony. Why don’t you fake a phone call? You’ve got a phone in your car, don’t you?”

“Hey, that’s not bad,” said Richard. “Sick mother, business meeting, Seth in jail, ex-wife attempting suicide.”

“I like that last one,” I said. “She’d be sympathetic and triumphant. And that way you could drop her, say, with me.”

“With you?”

“Right. Then I could drive her back to your place or the airport.”

“Not to my place—one of the others is already there.”

“But what about Hilary’s party?” Gerald asked.

“Oh, you won’t miss me for an hour or so.”

Richard had been thinking. “Okay, so Marlene goes off with Henry and I go to pick up Sheila and bring her back for the party.”

“Then another fake phone call?” I suggested.

“But what about Meredith? She’s at the house. How do I hold her off?”

“She’s at your place?”

Richard consulted his Rolex. “Probably. And she’s got a key.”

“Easy. Call her up and tell her you’ve got to be away until suppertime. The pool’s full, isn’t it? The jacuzzi’s working?”

“You’re pretty good at this,” Gerald offered with a chuckle.

“Strictly imagination,” I allowed, “and a grasp of the uses of the telephone.”

“Now, let me get this straight,” said Richard.

So I laid it out for him once again, while Gerald excused himself, perhaps to record some quick notes in his study before putting on his tie and jacket.

#### IO. A LIFE IN THE TEMPERATE ZONE (III)

*Life in the Temperate Zone* will assuredly be the seminal work of suburban anthropology, Gerald McCormack the discipline’s founder—its Freud and Darwin. The monumental tome will be required reading for unborn scholars and, in the fullness of time, Gerald will become his work, his last name.

It was not his intent to originate anything methodological, of course.

Nothing was further from his mind. Gerald expected merely to adapt the research procedures he had learned in school to a new area and see what turned up. Indeed, he wished fervently to preserve his objectivity, which he naively and romantically imagined the early field-anthropologists had maintained on the edges of the villages they infiltrated mentally, on the beaches of the islands they invaded only with their notebooks and spectacles.

The split-level in the subdivision secured with the remnant of his patrimony was to be his base-of-operations, his lookout tower; his job with the large corporation merely a means of funding. He had no more intention of becoming a vice president than of getting married, starting a family—of going native, so to speak. To begin with, logic told him that the success of his enterprise would depend entirely on his detachment.

The complexity of the questions raised by Gerald's work leaves me perplexed. One gets quite lost in them. For example, what is Gerald's precise attitude toward his life? He is a suburban anthropologist, not a diarist or autobiographer. In their final and destined form, his copious notes will resound with the same scientific purity of timbre as a mathematician's treatise. And yet Gerald's immersion in his material (an odd way to speak of a man's existence) calls into question not just the objectivity of his work but—and this is far more profoundly distressing—the subjectivity of his life. All of his relationships are objects of observation. To be sure, other men and women have watched themselves live and raised self-consciousness to levels of refinement bordering on solipsism, but no one had done so in quite the same spirit or for the same purposes as Gerald McCormack.

(I have been observing him doing it all along—what am I to make, then, of my own peculiar position?)

Gerald has been assiduous. He is invariably one of the very first to adopt new trends—to shop at discount department stores, buy a car with a Wankel engine, drink mineral water, sit on pipe furniture, take up bicycling—but he drops them quickly. He is not insincere, at least in so far as sincerity belongs to the social scientist with such a relation to his work. As he once said to me, "What people in the suburbs do with their lives is often the result of what they studied in school." Naturally, I observed that a dentist has an office in which to be a dentist and a home in which not to be one, but Gerald just shrugged, saying: "Think of it this way: Other men have boats or lathes in their basements; my hobby is my job and my

family, my neighbors and friends. My real work is to identify underlying patterns and significant relations, to examine shopping, analyze driving, lawn sports, conjugal duties, cultural determinants." I told him it still seemed weird to me and always would.

Gerald is a nice guy, none nicer. He once told me about niceness in his inimitable style. "In the country and in the city, status is actually more important than in the suburbs. I know it is supposed to be otherwise, but those who say so have not fully examined the matter or thought through the evidence. In the rural areas or in the cities inequality is presumed. In the former, status is based on considerations like parentage or periods of residence; in the city on money primarily, or on power. However, in the suburbs, a fundamental equality can be assumed. To live in a given suburb at all requires a certain level of income, and the neighborhoods are mostly too new to establish prestige on an accounting of generations. For these reasons, niceness is at a premium in the suburbs. In a sense, it is niceness itself that creates what hierarchy there is, though it is actually more a matter of approval or disapproval, of being in or out." So perhaps Gerald's niceness is protective coloration? Oh my.

"What powers of deception!" I once cried in horror and admiration. "And what if Virginia were to find out?" I exclaimed aloud while, to myself, I wondered if Gerald might some day need material for a chapter on divorce.

"Let's just say I'm still working on my dissertation and leave it at that," Gerald said simply. He is very modest, but I would give a lot to know how he keeps himself straight with himself.

## II. PLAYROOMS VERSUS POWDER ROOMS

Seth Lapidus tilted the pinball machine for the third time in a row and pronounced four expletives. The military school had given him vocabulary, muscles, and a brushcut, along with a veneer of discipline. He called his father "sir." In fact, he now called all grown men "sir." The word shot out of him like a fist.

"God, sometimes I hate this place," he said to Bruce.

"The playroom?" Bruce sat on the pool table watching Seth get angry.

"No. This town, the adults. They're all so screwed up."

"Well," said Bruce slowly, "it's comfortable here, and I think our parents are very nice people."

"Nice?" Seth pounded his fist on the glass top of the pinball machine and laughed with theatrical bitterness. "You're the only really nice one, Bruce, and if you were any smarter you wouldn't be."

"You mean if I were smarter I'd see that people weren't nice, or that I wouldn't be nice?"

"Maybe both."

"What are you so mad about, Seth?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Bruce got off the pool table and took his place at the pinball machine.

Hilary pounded down the stairs to yell at her brother for not remembering to take Pebbles out. There had been an accident on the no-wax kitchen floor. "You ditso!" she began.

Seth compared Hilary unfavorably to the women in his magazines. He wondered if she were still a virgin and decided she must be. Her nails were too long and her hair too carefully done. He thought he grasped her priorities and wondered if his younger sister would turn out more like the deliberately shallow Hilary or that passionate slut, their mother. When he was away at school he missed his mother and thought of her as a victim; in her presence, though, he found it impossible to do either. He was perpetually infuriated with his father but gladly took every bribe. All that money intoxicated and intimidated him. It was Seth who didn't understand his anger, not Bruce. Perhaps understanding is Bruce's vocation.

"You look terrific, Hilary," Seth said unctuously.

"Thanks. You're coming to my party, aren't you?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Good."

"Check out my new car?"

"I saw it in the driveway. Nice—black's great for sports cars. What're you going to do this summer?"

"Taking flying lessons. Scuba, Sailing. Martial arts. Yesterday I learned how to break a guy's neck with one hand."

## 12. A PERFORMANCE ON AN ORIGINAL INSTRUMENT

"Ladies and gentlemen of the school board, honored friends, parents, and you, members of the graduating class, I consider it a singular honor to have been invited to speak to you today—even if I had to insist upon it. As most of you know, I am this year retiring as principal of the high school



and, consequently, this will most probably be my last chance to indulge in public speaking of any kind. Having spent forty-four years in education—many of them in front of a class—I will find that not so much a great loss but rather an enormous relief. Anyway, I should like to take the unorthodox step this afternoon of using the occasion to tell something like the truth. I hope this break with ritual and tradition will be overlooked in view of my age; indeed, I feel certain it will be.

“First off, graduates, please do not leave here under the impression that you are, in any meaningful sense of the word, educated. True, a few of you have managed to learn a few things—mostly by virtue of your own curiosity or, more likely, your need for psychological compensation. Let us be frank, if not with one another, then at least from me to you. This high school does not exist as an educational institution, nor is it part of an educational system. What we do here is keep watch over the adolescents of a wealthy community and try not to prevent them from matriculating at colleges and universities whose degrees will help to ensure that these adolescents become wealthy in their turn. This school offers courses in driver’s education, guitar-playing, life-enhancement skills, parenting, sexual hygiene, French cooking, transactional analysis, transcendental meditation, four-cylinder engine rebuilding, how to pick a mate for life, karate, popular bestsellers, lifestyle awareness, alcohol education, avoiding drug addiction, and dieting. Our college preparatory curriculum is, for the most part, merely an occasion for our more frustrated or egomaniacal teachers to indulge themselves while utterly losing most of their students. The consistently generous and guilt-ridden political attitudes of the school board and most of you parents toward these fine young people have resulted, over the last generation or so, in such a condition of student privilege and entitlement that smoking is no longer confined to the bathrooms and I have twice this year found couples fornicating in the gymnasium even before lunch. The hallways are a pharmaceutical emporium and the school grounds a moto-cross dirt track. Grades are routinely changed for students whose parents have influence, and those students lacking such well-connected progenitors physically threaten their teachers with astounding frequency. Threats of another sort are not uncommon either: this year alone five female students accused six male teachers of rape, two female teachers of sexual harassment, and one teacher of being of indeterminate gender and an evangelical temperament. Nine of our graduating

seniors would have been convicted of aggravated assault or malicious arson but for the efforts of their parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

"The salaries paid to myself and my staff are risible, given the concentration of wealth around us. We would do considerably better were we to receive but a tenth of the cash you parents have spent on all the cars bought as graduation gifts in the last month. It is no longer amusing to me to be informed by a corporate lawyer or dermatologist who makes twenty times my salary that teachers are sacred and their divine vocation requires a vow of poverty. It does not do my heart good to know that not one of my faculty can afford to live here or that, should one of you require a cab during the summer, it will probably be driven by a teacher.

"As you go forth, children, bear in mind that life is unfair and essentially tragic, that whining is bearable only when expressed as high art and not always then, that the story of every human life is a story of failure, and that youth is essentially a function of one's capacity for disillusionment. Do not congratulate yourselves—as is the custom on these occasions—that your elders have screwed the world up and that you will not. Be assured that you will screw it up in your turn, perhaps more irremediably. Try to avoid putting cosmetics on in public and to learn a little compassion for people trying to earn a living. Remember that he who lives by partying will die by it and that copulation as an end-in-itself is at best no more than a bit of fun. *Medio tutissimus ibis.*

"Now if you will come forward for these ludicrously over elaborate diplomas as I announce your name. . . ."

### 13. APOCALYPTIC HOE-DOWN

There is a certain reprehensible, malicious pleasure in setting time-bombs and firing off torpedos. From a safe distance one can observe—through the detached mediation of binoculars, of periscopes—the terrible but fascinating consequences of one's actions. To a child, at least, the sense of responsibility is indirectly proportional to the distance; thus, this pleasure is only slightly tinged with guilt. It is a childish pleasure, to be sure, but then, after all, I am still a child, as everyone conspires to remind me.

Upon returning from Hilary's graduation, Richard dropped Marlene at the house with the understanding that Uncle Henry would at once—before the party began—drive her back to the airport hotel. He would have flirted all the way had I not intervened, making sure that Marlene and Seth

were introduced to one another. Marlene had never met Seth before and, for their respective reasons, the two took to each other and decided to stay at the noisy party. There was little poor Uncle H. could do, let alone Mom and Dad, who had their hands full.

Seth and Marlene talked, ate, danced, postured. The immovable Marlene, as I surmised, was touched that the unfortunate boy was as yet oblivious of his mother's attempt to remove herself from his life while, at the same time, she was not insensible to this chance of endearing herself (maternally, as it were) to the magnanimous and gallant Richard, flying to ex's bedside in spite of everything. Seth and Marlene danced together very nicely, in my opinion, and Seth promised Marlene a ride back to the airport hotel in his new black sports car.

Not satisfied with this, a half-hour later I took the ecstatic Seth aside and pretended to beg him on Hilary's behalf to go to his father's new crystal palace to fetch some of the record collection he kept there. He was so reluctant to part with Marlene that he convinced her to go along with him, which was fine with me. I waved from the deck.

When Seth and Marlene came back they were a good deal less jolly, a great deal less *à deux*. Meredith was with them (squeezed into the sports car's back seat). She had insisted on coming along too, her long black hair still damp from her swim.

Richard arrived only fifteen minutes later with Sheila, the third nail in his coffin. By then the house was filled with dishes, confusion, plastic champagne glasses, folding chairs, back-beat rhythms, and graduating seniors. The complex confrontation took place in the dining room, and I must say Richard Lapidus handled it with admirable aplomb. He laughed a lot, as one might who knows he holds the best cards. "Well, what was I supposed to do?" he announced seigneurially. "You all showed up on the same day. No juggler's perfect!"

The women looked at one another, each waiting for one of her rivals to ruin her chances by showing herself a virago or by calling for feminine solidarity. Perhaps they all wanted to, but none actually did. Maybe the stakes were too high. Seth looked terrified, lustful and hostile all at once. He was silent too—perhaps he was thinking of his tremendous trust fund. In the end, all five of them stayed for a half-hour then went back to Richard's mansion where, I presume, the liquor cabinet, hot-tub, jacuzzi, and heated pool all awaited them, ready as ever to liquidate any non-

financial catastrophe. To Marlene's credit, she drove over with Seth.

I saw Uncle Henry wink at me from his hiding place in the far corner of the deck, just as if the mischief had been his doing rather than mine. Could it be we are both subversives, spies, saboteurs?

#### 14. JUST BELOW THE LEVEL OF THE TEMPERATE ZONE

##### A. In the Study

As I anticipated, my notes for today have been exceptionally extensive and hard-won. It was at once delicate and difficult to observe Hilary and her friends, listen to Henry's wilder speculations, keep track of Richard's little contretemps, while also serving as host, hubby, and proud parent. My genius son continues to surprise and provoke me, just as Hilary refuses to. It is as if she were determined to fulfill every conceivable generalization of suburban anthropology and Bruce equally resolved to prove rules solely by providing endless exceptions to them. Virginia did quite well today; her back became better once the strain of preparing for the party was behind her. In fact, she was so amused by the drama of Richard and the Rhine Maidens that she even forgot one of her allergies and had two glasses of champagne. The kinship group remains, however, atomized.

##### B. In the Car

Because of his rage and his money, Seth will run into trouble at his military school. His father will pull strings to get him admitted to some college, but he will have to drop out. Simultaneously aiming to please and escape his father (Seth's soul I suppose to be a soup of mixed intentions), he will attempt to join the Air Force. He will, of course, wish to become a pilot. The Air Force will inform him that he must finish college first. Thus, he will return to school with a purpose and graduate high in his class, join the Air Force, and make it neatly through flight school. With his father's help, he will get himself assigned to the nearest airbase. Perhaps one spring morning he will have his plane fueled and armed—rockets, bombs, cannon—and take off for his old neighborhood, for the vicinity of the high school that expelled him, the crystal palace where he never felt at home, his mother's muddy midden. He will begin his initial strafing run around the time that the first runners are jogging up their driveways, the most devoted tennis players are taking two, the earliest golfers teeing up.

### C. At the Window

I imagine my uncle thinks as he drives home to his busy unknown life in the city. He has a loose and speculative mind, undisciplined and mercurial. He avoids serious matters, preferring jokes and incessant ironies. I suspect we are for him a sort of side-show, while his real existence is wholly inward. In this lies our kinship and our separation. That is, our kinship may be mutually recognized and yet do neither of us any good.

My own life here is pleasantly stifling, comfortably stocked with the appurtenances of boredom. My mischievousness today may be a sign of the direction in which I am headed: a life of ghostly, marginal experimentation without roots, love, or purpose. A life of longing and sarcasm.

If I am ever to find my vocation it must be elsewhere.