

*from Leonardo Is Dying · R. M. Berry*

LEONARDO IS DYING. From beneath the heap of sheets, blankets, rugs, comforts, skins, quilts, odd coats and, to judge from the foul scent, perhaps even the bag used for butcher's offal—these people having so little notion of the fit use of anything—from beneath this mass of sundry bed-clothes that has rendered the simple drawing of breath a feat, Leonardo has managed to slide his one good hand tangentially to the downward thrust, much the way that in better circumstances two well-shaped gears might transfer work or motion, so that now his fingers dangle from the edge of the bed in the grime stirred up by Mathurine's ox-hide sabots each time she shuffles past on her way out the door. It little matters that spring has come and with it warmth and an end to the drizzle that all winter long has rattled Leonardo's teeth and bones. Leonardo, nevertheless, finds himself smothered beneath this witless attempt to encase the soul in its vital heat and by sheer bulk to tether it to earth. None of this being, of course, Leonardo's doing. Three damp winters have passed since, already an old man, he crossed the alps and, stepping for the first time upon French soil, walked apart from the royal escort, removed his velvet slippers and, holding them above the last braccia of Italian dirt his eyes would ever see, slapped the dust from their soles in dismissal of the world he believed in too easily or perhaps revered not enough or at least never understood, and so arrived here at last to end his days in this chamber where he realized at once the feeble strand of pale light would never illuminate the darkness into which he had already begun to leak. The slate grooves, the ragged line of crenellations, the silver film of clouds or, what you really can't see from here, the river that is so idle Leonardo has counted the hairs of his beard in it—all this is darkness, and at each moment it threatens to soak him up like a wine sop and squeeze him out again upon the steaming stones of the Piazza della Signoria where the timbre of boys' voices echoes in the arches of the Loggia and sweating men in black gowns dispute the spelling of Latin prepositions beneath the Tuscan sky. It would be wise now, Leonardo thinks, not to know longing, but for no worthwhile reason he finds himself recalling the smell of clammy hands. Surely, if only the light were well-placed, a man could slap his thigh once and soar from the slopes of Cecero or gaze up at Venezia from the bottom of the sea or

square the circle or sniff the vital sprite as it flutters from the ventricle of a pierced pig's heart. He thinks that the rough sound he hears at this moment is Salai's slovenly broom on the workshop floor as the spruce chips rattle across the planks and school-children shout in the piazza. The taste of flesh can be so pungent that fools have tried to fatten on it, and Leonardo marvels that the motion of Salai's narrow hips should trace the same careless parabola as the fir trees swaying on Monte Albano or the eels that glide through provincial streams. Surely the world is an ingenious invention, and somewhere in its dark hollows rests a single idea that, if only you knew it, could release you like a flight of pigeons, though Leonardo has long since renounced fumbling for this light or, at least, has learned to get along without it.

Well, it's *not* the sound of Salai's broom, as Leonardo opens one eye to see Mathurine's impossibly rotund face peering down at him from a platter of turnips and beans, for Salai is God-knows-where, flown most likely to Milan to squat on a hectare of ground that he expects will make him the honest man his wits haven't. So, fatten, fornicate, and stay gone. You're still wrong. Well, then, it's not Salai, this shuffling of Mathurine's feet across the filthy floor, and so Leonardo twists the fingers of his good left hand back and upward, recalling the elaborate mechanism of the wrist and the ball of the shoulder which, though neither perfect in isolation, can together enable a man to reverse himself in the forward movement of his own deeds, until he finally touches the sheep's tripe inflated and pinned to the ticking just where he placed it three days before. Only dead della Torre could rightly appreciate the subtlety and cunning of these preparations, only someone whose youthful wit had passed through the ordeal of light, the sniffing and poking about in the bunghole of nature, the kiss of the icy real, only such a one as Marcantonio, and perhaps not even he would have had the sprightliness of mind to understand this last *dimonstrazione*, though Leonardo recalls the heat of the candles, the unbreathable miasma in the Pavian night, and the blue sheen of the knife as it lifted the tissue from the cadaver's cheek: So much for beauty, eh? No, della Torre died too young to grow curious about darkness, to suspect that in the endless night of the dissecting table, confronted with the certainty of sinew and bile, glottis and gum, the hard and the pulpy of creation's engine, that even there it was as much the silence, the black border of light, that held them poised in the stench, not so much amazed as viciously intent, as layer

opened onto layer and took them always deeper into what Leonardo realizes now may have never been there at all. No, della Torre was too much the new man to feel this confusion and so might scoff at Leonardo's last clutch for the veil: There's little to be said of motion, he'd explain. You cannot place it upon the table; you cannot pare its sections; where are the names of its parts? And afterwards, in the warmth of the morning sipping goat's milk upon the veranda, he was always too merry, always ready to give word to what was seen, always quick to call Leonardo's silence flagging vigor. It was not lucidity Marcantonio lacked, but something more like embarrassment or fear: Pity the poor child who offers me her heart, he'd said chuckling; I'll probably carve her up on the altar.

The tripe is blue, the color of the afternoon sky over Lucca when the olive trees are nearly ripe and the grape vines twist up like thumbs. Leonardo worked the color carefully, mixing plant resins and Dutch oils, for the spectacle must amaze, not shock, just as the Ligurian water fills you with rich thoughts at evenings near Rapallo. From where his head lies immersed in this pillow Leonardo can see that Mathurine has poised the platter of steaming vegetables at the apex of the mountain of bedclothes, and he calculates by sighting upward along the ridge of his nose that it rests nearly ten degrees westward of the heap's axis, so that if he twitches his shoulder in the manipulation of his wrist the red china bowl rattles softly against the goblet, a sound not unlike the chime of finger-cymbals or the faint trundling of a tambour. This threatens a ruinous distraction. The exterior ligament from the hinge of the elbow running dorsally to the pectoralis minor is a potential but not necessary actant in the mobility of the hand and, Leonardo determines, it will be possible given adequate patience to test the tripe's resilience and loosen the pin without troubling glass, china or cutlery, if, that is, the woman has even thought to bring cutlery—he's seen her feeding like a horse, face half lost beneath the sides of her bowl—though all must be done dextrously and, at the last moment, with dispatch. Mathurine waddles across the floor kicking up clouds of crumbs as she touches a cold andiron, brushes a vague hand against a tapestry, seems only to gaze sadly at a frame out of plumb, her position in Leonardo's household being more that of havoc's sidekick than its adversary. Her broad back, as she half-hoists her girth momentarily upon the window ledge, still seems to conceal beneath its heaving flesh a flirtation with straight square shoulders, long ago visciated by the barnyard coupling of

grunting grandsires and dams, and Leonardo thinks that he might have once attempted to paint that, the lost figure in the amorphous tissue, though the conceit would not be of shade but of design, of a line so innocent that it could never be believed. If Mathurine were to speak now, gazing as she does at nothing, she would say, *si le maître ne mange pas comme un homme, il mourra comme un lapin*, which means basically that the world for her is no longer a surprising place, despite a well-developed curiosity about deformity and gore, but even if she were to say this, Leonardo would only conclude that she is complaining yet again about the vast and hideously yellow engine Salai has deposited in the courtyard, a phenomenon more disturbing to think on than the infinite carnage of Mathurine's imagination. Leonardo, as a matter of fact, prefers not to think on it, and if only his chest were not pinned beneath this mountain of rags and goose feathers and what looks like from here the corner of the stable mat, he would dismiss Salai and the whole petty business with a peremptory snort, but when—in an instance of characteristic self-forgetfulness and without due allowance for the impossibility of even normal respiration under the present circumstances—he doggedly tries, all he manages is a feeble wheeze, which tickles his throat and provokes him to cough in earnest, thereby rocking the platter precariously and threatening to bury his face in a cascade of garlicky beans. One ought not desire the impossible. There would seem to be nothing for it but to let his eyelids sag, droop his fingers in the muck and, for once in his life with more time than employment, to decide to have a dream.

Leonardo's dream is not very interesting. We are accustomed to the remarkable deathbed visions of famous men and women, to presentiments of their future repute or infamy, moments of highblown remorse, a final vaporous communication with a nemesis long forgot, but Leonardo's dream is concerned with updrafts. More particularly, it is concerned with the critical moment when any circularly augmenting torrent, by accumulation of superfluous force, undergoes a catastrophe and returns to quiescence. We possess whole libraries to disabuse us of any wonder at such spectacles, and even if we cannot make sense of these libraries ourselves, we are confident that someone in Massachusetts or California can; so we should hardly be expected to find vortices amusing. However, Leonardo right now is feeling quite gleeful about what can only appear to him as a remarkable game of comeuppance nature plays in wind and water. Having

already discovered the inseparability of aerodynamic push and shove and suspecting that even ambition is but another way of being blown, Leonardo traces with an enthusiasm belied by its tedious detail the oscillating lunulae of a nubile boy astride a sycamore leaf, now zigging down a groundswirl, now zagging roundly upward in a thermal, neither air-toy nor wind's master but a kind of player in the atmospheric catch-as-catch-can, the point being not to get somewhere but just to keep afloat, and this without looking too much a fool. Power here seems to have a good deal to do with well-timed restraint. If Leonardo were awake, he would explain to us that della Torre may have been right about beauty, though this is hardly reassuring, and he would admit that even della Torre could not exaggerate the virtues of the knife, the staying spectacle of organ and bone, but Leonardo suspects that della Torre died — not of fever — but of insufficient amazement at updrafts and that, if only you could create them or, failing that, control them or, failing this as well, then if you could just learn how to behave in their presence, well, you might soon come to trust what even your eyes have never seen. You know motion or you know death, and perhaps this is God's turnabout, this law for returning works of superfluous force to quiescence: statues crumble, walls peel, in the vast accumulation of words and still more words a man is apt to lose his way. It may be possible to live an astonishing life and still amount to nothing, and Leonardo wishes he had told della Torre in Pavia what he wishes on that last afternoon he had told Salai gazing out at the courtyard but didn't actually tell anyone until just yesterday when he told Melzi who stood there with that dewy-eyed, beatific look of his and, of course, understood not a word: that only a dullard ever expects to get to the end of something. A scandal to Galen but, then, he wrote in Greek.

It was, after all, in Pavia — though twenty years before della Torre ever got there — that Leonardo had first glimpsed the equivocation of light. He'd been reading the *Perspectiva* and one evening sought out lunatic Fazio at home, hungry to talk about number and proportion, but Fazio answered the door half-naked in his scarlet gown, his eyelids hopping, his fingers a-flutter about his throat, and would hear nothing but that Leonardo dine with the ignoramus blacksmith, a true mathematician! the only philosopher in Lombardy! and so Leonardo recalled urgent affairs and fled to the banks of the Ticino where he wondered that the feeble eye could send out beams, as the Platonists claimed, and bag the moon like a

tiger. It was in this dusk that he encountered the man without words. He was scurvy and bent and no higher than a nipple, and Leonardo followed him at first for the twist of his nose, but soon for the flurry of knees and elbows that against all nature propelled him over the footbridge and past the lunga dimora, and finally just because, like Fazio, Leonardo was under the moon's spell and would let pandemonium have its way. It led him to the brothel called Malnido, a squat fugitive from reason, where the women sprawled upon purple divans like corn-stuffed capons and a tubercular castrati plucked a chitarra and sang through his nose and huge white Persians flicked their tails upon the window sills, and where the man without words threw himself into space like a wind-driven dustball, appearing from beneath a staircase bearing cinnabar and cumin or powdered linens or sugar-water for a douche, hovering in the air before the smiling concubines, his breath coming in hissing heaves, his pupils bobbing in a sea of phlegmy white. The women called him Pietro when they were about their business and Camillo when they were weary from love, and whenever they lay upon a cushion scratching their fur with black-rimmed nails it was just, *Where's the little fart?* but Leonardo suspected that in his manic self-accumulation from under ferns and behind balusters and from within the wrinkle of a rug, this gathering diaspora of the human form was letting space speak its name, and Leonardo had wanted to draw that, the silent speech of twitching hip and foot and cheek and thigh, but through laggard evenings as his silver-point skimmed over the bone-meal leaves and the pet pheasant flapped noisily at the end of its tether and the cloying gum of female flesh stole across his own deft skin, Leonardo again and again lost the line of the wild dwarf's flight or saw it attenuate and snap or turn prosy and still, and so one morning he seized the wordless man in the rag box where he slept like a drawn spring and, calling him teacher, offered him dinari, then scuzi, and finally a Rhenish florin to compose himself upon the roof before Leonardo's eye while the sun rose from the gable to the chimney's edge so this hieroglyph of movement could be deciphered in the quiet light. But the man said no. That is, he said nothing, but merely cocked his head, slurped the air into his nose, hissed it out his teeth again, sliding his eyes both left and right in a calculated tic Leonardo could call neither annoyance nor fear, and spinning upon a foot like a weathercock upon a swivel, flew toward the terra cotta half-wall beyond which Leonardo could see the green and steaming valley of the Po and the lazy curve

of a goshawk hanging in the sky, to smash his small sack of flesh and bones against the brick, bouncing back again, not so much startled as harshly recollected, once, twice, three times, until with his sleeve torn and the thin muscle of his shoulder beginning to redden he seemed to draw himself up, gaze sharply into Leonardo's eyes and, flying a last time at the wall's rough face, sought out its clay edge as if to enter there, his flight seeming to belie the immobility of stone, and with something less than a shiver, a kind of hitch in his spine that for the rest of Leonardo's days would lie just the other side of recall's horizon casting its long shadow across his notes and games, the man without words opened himself to the wall's geometry and was gone. And even though Leonardo was soon to pass from the Malnido's life with many of the mute's secrets—the feverish restraint of upturned eyes, the hand's way of denying its need, the angle of the head that announces deceit—the meaning of this *dimonstrazione* would remain strange to him until an October afternoon nine years later when walking beside the Arno he watched an eddy spin itself once, twice, three times, into a heaving rhythm and then disappear into a fissure in the current, as if all along a shape had been emerging there, though no one had ever been sufficiently amazed to attend it . . . not until this moment would Leonardo realize that Pietro Camillo had already discovered the secret of updrafts, the little fart, and that if only Leonardo had known how to conjure from him this secret he might have understood why ambition can never remain simply itself, how his own life could conclude in the most startling turnabout of all, and why until you trust the darkness you will always be blinded by the light.

Ambitious?! By all means, I am ambitious, della Torre had said, his glass of goat's milk poised against his nether lip and his eyes sliding giddily across the veranda: Why else should I choose to live wrist-deep in corruption? And gazing at the gleaming profile of della Torre's face, the teeth so white and young and merry, Leonardo had marveled at the duplicity of plainspoken things, and he had wanted to warn Marcantonio that beauty has its uses, that you can draw motion, but at the moment Leonardo hadn't himself wanted to consider these matters too closely, and so had merely retorted that nature doesn't rot, or some such, and settling back to watch the sun seep through the willows, he'd begun to form the dream he is dreaming now, this image of a boy's amber knees astride a platan leaf as it sails along a current of air, steered by the lightest nip and tug, until it is

whipped into a swirl of clouds, tucked up under itself and, with the boy hugging sky and vapor, puffed right out again like cream squeezed from an éclair. Lying here beneath this mound of smelly bedding Leonardo finds this inversion of effort and success a remarkable game, something a clever man might play, the gleeful flip-flop of nature and fate, and so begins to giggle softly down in his throat setting his nose to wheezing and his gullet to gurgling, a sound enough like the death-rattle to bring Mathurine clambering up from the kitchen, her hips rising and falling like the rocker-arm of a waterwheel, the half-formed question on her lips, is it now? Of course, what she says is more like, let this be the last time I ever have to climb these God-forsaken stairs, or actually, *Mon Dieu, s'il vous plaît, tuez-le*, Leonardo having reassured her just three days ago that she'd receive a certain black velvet house cloak upon his passing, a tactical blunder if ever there was one inasmuch as Mathurine's job is to postpone that passing as long as possible—but, then, Leonardo's never been especially savvy in his dealings with persons not spectacularly wicked or covetous on a grand scale.

Leonardo hears what she says, but having long ago decided that everyone in this country is attempting to speak Italian and doing it badly, he concludes that she has actually tried to announce Salai's return for the garishly yellow contraption in the courtyard, another of her fabrications or flat-footed solecisms or, at any rate, a simple indication of the boundless bewilderment with which she manages his affairs. No, he calmly explains to her, Salai cannot have returned because Salai is in hell where he is obliged to suffer hideous torment for having tried to make the world appear unintelligible, or if not in hell then in Italy, but either way he won't arrive here except with a good deal of clatter, and when he does, he's not to be allowed to fling himself tastelessly upon my chest declaring that he's always recognized the identity of truth and desire, or anything like that. Leonardo feels pleased with this statement but is puzzled to notice that Mathurine has slipped off her house dress and is now zig-zagging earthward upon a sycamore leaf, her face turned rapturously up to him with the wan eyes, glittering curls and opalescent cheeks of a Florentine euphbus, and he tries to demand that she dismount from his dream at once and tell Melzi not to forget the 87 books on astronomy that Leonardo intended to write next spring or della Torre that the aortic valve is almost a perfectly falcated triangle or, if not that, then at least have the decency to sweep the



filth from this floor and in the future to get undressed in the kitchen. Maturine, however, is not about to sweep this or any other floor, leaning as she is about four inches from Leonardo's face and thoroughly aggrieved at what she sees there—quite possibly a grin and, without doubt, breathing—and as she tosses her hands up to heaven in protest at one more injustice done her by malign stars and this madman who won't even eat horse steak for dinner, she starts to vent her frustration in a muttered litany of the miscellaneous fornications, sexual parts and products of elimination to be smirked at or stepped in around any Touraine farmyard, but no matter, for the rising knuckles of her left hand have slammed into the far edge of the platter balanced upon the fulcrum of the bedclothes, catapulting the goblet and cutlery over her head, muddling her words in the clatter of breaking glass, and inundating Leonardo's face in a deluge of turnips, onions, leeks, garlic, a bay leaf, and half a kilo of white kidney beans. At this point Leonardo wakes, and deciding that the present sensation is extraordinary but still not death, he gazes up through the glutinous film of boiled cream and carrot drippings and announces: No, he will be riding a horse.

May 2, 1519 at the Clos Luce in Amboise on the Loire, and Leonardo da Vinci is dying. Twenty years from this day King François I, who has brought Leonardo here just to hear him talk, will declare in front of Benvenuto Cellini that no other mortal in the history of the world ever knew so much, and though François himself probably understood only about a tenth of what Leonardo ever told him, next week when he learns of Leonardo's death the king will break down and cry. Isabella d'Este, who could boss Correggio and Mantegna like chambermaids and managed Ariosto as deftly as a suitor and who has been trying her entire life to trade anything short of and including her virtue, though possibly not her reputation, for a smear of Leonardo's paint, will within two months of this day make one of his forgotten doodles the centerpiece of her studiolo, and though Florence, Milan, Venice, Rome have never had much use for Leonardo while it was still necessary to feed him, tomorrow when he's gone they'll make a legend of him almost at once: the most beautiful man Florence had ever seen; able to bend horseshoes in his bare hands; a singer with an incomparable voice; pioneering anatomist and Cesare Borgia's personal military engineer; the best verse improviser of the quattro cento; architectural rival of Bramante and builder of the nautilus staircase at Blois; illustrator and

the true author of Luca Pacioli's *De Divine Proportione*; an irresistible orator; according to Paolo Giovio, the ultimate authority on matters of beauty and taste; for Raphael another Plato; in Castiglione's *Courtier*, the first among the great painters; to Lomazzo, a critic of preternatural insight—after awhile even the hyperboles get boring: Giorgio Vasari speaks for the age when he says simply that some art can be attributed to diligence, some to talent and birth, but in order to explain Leonardo, one must speak of God. And yet how puzzling this all seems today, here in Leonardo's bedroom attended by a housekeeper speaking an unintelligible tongue and, before long, by a procession of other equally unimaginative souls, as sliced beets drip down Leonardo's forehead and shallots mingle with his beard and in Rome Raphael and his fifty assistants clamor down corridors that bear no mark of Leonardo's passage and in Florence Michelangelo's *David* guards the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio where Leonardo's unfinished *anghiari* awaits obliteration and near Pisa the ingenious Arno canal to the sea is a mound of soggy earth and in Venice no divers prowl beneath the hulls of foreign ships and as the monks chew their bread at Santa Maria delle Grazie the plaster peels from Saint Bartholomew's nose and before the Castello Sforzesco the carts of silk merchants crush the clay remnants of the most colossal statue ever conceived and at the university in Padua no librarian holds the definitively illustrated encyclopedia of the human form and throughout northern Italy abbots and lords and poetasters and patrons cling to the bitter memories and bad contracts of works never begun, promises never kept, dreams that remain only dreams and soon not even that. Starting tomorrow, all that will remain of the countless books conceived and outlined and, in flights of strange vigor, spoken of as accomplished facts will be several thousand loose pages of contradictory and almost uneditable notes, drawings, introductions, sketches, letters, fables, jokes, revisions, drafts, musings—herein the nine essentials of painting . . . painting has five parts . . . the art of painting can be reduced to thirteen constituents . . . the painter should know the seven elements of which the art consists . . . there are only three . . .—all mixed in with grocery lists, expense accounts, memoranda (you will construct an obsidian vessel from which to drink your morning concoction . . .), and opaque allusions to the tomes, companions, events, pupils who momentarily caught Leonardo's attention then slipped away. So much, so little.

The mystery is less Leonardo's life than the world's fascination with it.

Others who achieved more, interest far less, and though there is always great pleasure in the consideration of careers prematurely ended and the fragments of ambitious works, no figure possesses the imagination as does Leonardo. He clutches at memory like a childhood humiliation, something that maturity and good sense would acknowledge and put aside but that at moments of half-wakefulness returns with its original power still intact, causing the beleaguered soul to shudder, sit bolt-upright in bed, and almost shout, "This time don't do it!" He may have been history's most talented man; he was certainly one of the most intellectually various; he was learned, though probably not as learned as was once believed; it can be argued that he was Europe's greatest painter, but also that his stature has been hugely overrated; however, it would seem difficult to argue that the world has ever known a failure to match him. Leonardo da Vinci, the grandest missed opportunity in the history of the planet. No one ever imagined so much, went so far towards realizing it, showed that he could have finished, and left such a shambles behind. A dozen works, perhaps a baker's dozen, badly preserved or damned in the materials used to make them, often altered or hinting at clumsy collaboration, many of these unfinished, some of doubtful authenticity, most quite small, no disciples worth mentioning, no school, no family, no children, few friends—this, plus accounts of lost masterpieces, tantalizing hints of improbable deeds, unverifiable legends, endless speculations, more beginnings than sanity can account for, and always plans, plans, plans. How to take seriously a sixty-year-old who still seems to be deciding what to do with his life? Plucking random maxims from his meanderings one can soon believe that Leonardo was only an insight away from anticipating the future, but Leonardo was a virtuoso of forgetfulness, and there is little assurance that the lucid note jotted in 1499 was ever considered in 1506. It is no easily recognizable spirit who regarded the male member as a sort of rodent haphazardly glued to the human frame or sought the explanation of blood in underground streams or imagined flight as a muscular navigation of a river of air or meditated upon the triangle as upon a zen koan or imagined a mathematics of art or an aesthetics of the kidney or who pursued the unitary law of all reality as doggedly as another age had boiled and bubbled for the philosopher's stone and probably never learned his right hand from his left. The barrage of "if only's" that preserve Leonardo from dilettantism may actually deafen us to the dazzlingly straightforward statement his life

is making. May 3, 1519, Leonardo da Vinci will be as dead as dust. What does such a man imagine when he no longer imagines tomorrow? At the moment when a life becomes precisely equivalent to its deeds, when everyone has forgotten the reasons for an act, but no matter, because intentions don't count anymore anyway, when the perpetual worship of light has brought you to a land where each day is the color of raw wool and out your window you can see nothing of your own and behind you stretches a series of botched chances that simply stagger contemplation and the fact that you may have once been right amounts now to nothing at all, at this moment does the force of so much futility come rushing back and, suddenly seeing yourself trying to refine a miraculous fresco paint from walnuts or spending years upon a cartoon that will never know a brush or diddling with fantastic flying boats four centuries too soon or writing farcical letters to the devatdar of Syria or seeking to unriddle the universe just to persuade a bronze horse to rear, does such a man feel a shudder rip down his spine and, grasping the bedclothes, does he sit bolt-upright upon the mattress and begin to shout, This time don't do it!?

Well, Leonardo is thinking of paper lilies. They have been attached with thread made from a horse's tail to the blue sheep's tripe and right now as Leonardo edges his hand around Mathurine's sabots and back up under the tick again he wonders if he has arranged the strings of flowers so that they will not catch upon the posts of the bed and prematurely stop the inflated tripe in its upward trajectory. Actually, this is a vast simplification. Leonardo's last dimonstrazione has to do with ultimate things — absence, a cave's dark mouth, the silence that hems in speech — and it consists not of this single balloon made from a mutton's rubbery innards but of a whole roomful of them, thirty-nine to be precise, and a truckload of paper carnations, irises, roses, who-know-what-all, that only a Leonardo whose self-abstraction is all but monumental could have colored and folded and fluffed for an entire night with a single good hand, inconceivable enthusiasm, and the inept, sporadic assistance of the baffled Battista de Vilanis who nodded off to sleep somewhere around four A.M., all this only three days before the afternoon that will be Leonardo's last. To tell the truth, if della Torre were here, he'd back resolutely and wide-eyed right out of the goddamn room. Leonardo is obviously a colossal nut. From the blue tripe pinned to the ticking and dangling the string of lilies like a kite's tail run seventeen cords which each pass over pulley-wheels equipped with

primitive wooden rollers—the forerunners, someone will one day claim, of the modern steel bearing—located at the four corners of the bed, thus enabling the cords to pass around angles without sacrificing the greater part of their work-efficiency to friction, and from there up to the canopy and along the molding to the tapestry on the left of the fireplace and the two sets of curtains adjacent to the south window, which is the only one worth looking out of, and to the west one, through which all you can make out is the stone wall across the street and the hill behind. The invention is, of course, hopelessly elaborate, and even Leonardo suspects that it will never unfold itself at quite the moment planned; still, its intricacy is hardly even a flirtation with the chug and rumble that drives nature along, and if it should erupt into a dazzling illumination or simply into a muddle, Leonardo will hardly feel undone. There remains much to be studied where an outcome is missing, only more where holocaust is total or movement breaks down in-between—the point being not to know already what will happen but just to be nearby and intensely curious when something does.

Leonardo has not always been so finely balanced between success and failure. If Leonardo were capable of any real remorse, if he could think for more than two minutes on a past mistake without becoming exhilarated over what he'd learned, which he can't, being afflicted with a mind suited for puzzling over conch shells and face warts and for getting angry in a muttering, can-kicking sort of way but one that's never had much practice or, at least, hasn't gotten very good at the kind of irony that comes from really rollicking depression—if, in short, Leonardo were in any sense of the term a whole man, he might recall right now the night in Milan when, hardly even a courtier, merely a self-advertised jack-leg lutenist with a box full of drawings of tanks and machine guns and the preposterous assurance that he'd be happy to construct a bronze horse weighing just under a quarter of a million pounds, he had stood in a stairwell of the Castello Sforzesco as the guests strutted across the adjacent ballroom tiles in gold-brocade tunics that could have made an iceberg perspire and, listening to the rattle of tambourines, the blare of sackbuts, an occasional whoop from the gallery and—of all things—the clatter of horses' hooves over the floor, Leonardo had for the first time realized that he might not actually rise upon the broad curve of history as he'd always assumed but might instead find his own fate in the crack between two blocks of stone

not four inches from his thumb. It was the poet Bellincioni who revealed this to him, another Florentine and a man even now Leonardo has no idea whether to revere or despise. If Bellincioni had a failing, it was that you could not help but listen to him, and so being no more vile a flatterer than Leonardo himself or any of the other astrologers, jugglers, monkey-trainers, procurers, blood-letters, fops, or transvestite eye-brow pluckers whose only ambition was to lick for the rest of their natural lives the mud from Lodovico Sforza's dancing shoes, no more vile but perhaps better at it, Bellincioni had managed to convince the sallow-faced Lodovico that a Florentine poet would be infinitely superior to any Lombard nobleman at an activity infinitely less important than Milanese statecraft but nevertheless indispensable—i.e., Bellincioni could say better than Lodovico what Lodovico wanted to way—and so had succeeded in installing himself here on the backstairs of the Castello's ballroom to oversee the theatrical flattery of a duchess whose father, a very touchy king of Spain, was threatening to reclaim her twenty-thousand ducat dowry if her husband, a wildly neurotic duke of Milan, couldn't fulfill his obligation 'twixt the sheets. Even at thirty-eight and still waiting with considerable impatience for civilization to fling itself at his feet, Leonardo had not been fool enough to imagine Bellincioni could be trusted, but glancing into the passageway through whose opening he could see four Turkish captains dismount from their horses to declare that they, though benighted pagans, had galloped half a continent to gaze upon the unspeakable beauty of the daughter of Spain, a bit of histrionics that had taxed even Bellincioni's powers of exaggeration, Leonardo was startled to hear Bellincioni chuckle and, nodding toward the crack in the pink stones, murmur that nothing built mattered, agility was all. Leonardo at that moment cursed for the three hundred and ninety-third time the miserly education that had deprived him of a stinging Latin retort, and turning his back on Bellincioni he had begun to rehearse again the clockwork and series of gears that after five centuries would be termed a power relay but for Leonardo was still just a way to get things done, one that would actually succeed, though he didn't know it yet, and bring him about as close to celebrity as he would ever come. For not five meters from where Bellincioni stood was a spectacle more impressive to the eye than anything Bellincioni would ever offer to the ear: Leonardo's universe, the seven planets in their spheres with a heavenly choir and zodiac of gods, all floating in a ceiling-high in-

digo cosmos that when unveiled would suck the breath from the on-lookers' throats. And so Leonardo had wanted to reply that such deeds were all that mattered, that once his ingenious spring and counter-weight mechanism was set in motion, once the planets had begun to glide across the sky and the candle flames trembled through the niches in the night and Jupiter descended from his heavenly perch, that after this, the world's memory could never be the same, that Leonardo the novice of plans would become Leonardo the master of facts, but lacking both Latin and sufficient bravado to eulogize himself before another Florentine who'd gazed up at Brunelleschi's dome and stared at Ghiberti's doors—all this plus the fact that Leonardo wasn't even sure the fool thing was going to work—Leonardo merely coughed into his fist and, leaning toward the passageway through which he could glimpse the four Turks flinging up their arms in choreographed obeisance and a clown stuffing bananas in his codpiece and two beribboned stallions relieving themselves beside tables of pheasant and brains, he remarked that walls cracked because the earth was alive. Bellincioni's pinched face twitched into a smile, and laying his finger three times on Leonardo's sternum, he said: no, solidity's a harlot; the trick is to float on air.

It was never a question of belief, and if Leonardo were really capable of lingering upon his own disappointments he might gaze up right now from his mucky pillow and, seeing Mathurine staring stupidly back at him as she decides whether to sponge the catastrophe from the master's face or just to gather up the dishes and call it lunch, he might acknowledge that even in Milan, at the far edge of his fourth decade, he had already suspected Bellincioni was right, and if Salai were here Leonardo might finally grant him that consummation has its place, that deferred desire is hardly better than a carbuncle underneath your arm, and thus, looking out into the courtyard where the yellow engine had not yet come to squat like the memory of a filthy dream, Leonardo might have salvaged Salai's soul, or if not that exactly, then he might have at least told him that it was Bellincioni who had first tempted Leonardo's heart with the conceit of being blown, and so have acknowledged enough, confessed after a fashion, admitted *something*, without yielding all. But Salai is a carp who feeds on shame, and besides, Leonardo still doesn't know if Bellincioni was trying to save his life or destroy his mind. He only knows that the crack snaking upwards from the stair on which he stood and—not a quarter braccio from

his thumb—suddenly opening itself between two pink stones so that a slender maiden might slide her hand in almost to the wrist, that this crack seemed to run as deep as the fist into which the center of the planet was balled and as high as the wide-open palm of God, and he had paused to listen as Bellincioni recited, as if from the tablets of Leonardo's own eyes, the crumbling of the rock, the spreading of fissures in the creaking night, the first snap of mortar in the arch, and then the sagging schism as the Castello and Italy and all the earth with it collapsed into nature's hole.

The Milanese court was acrawl with more intrigues than cockroaches: there were at least one too many dukes, two too many wives, more mistresses than could be easily numbered, bastards bawling in the closets, pedophiles in the baptistry, and whole empires rising and falling with every pizzle and bank account, and yet throughout all of this, Leonardo had never doubted that his understanding would get him somewhere. It was not a confidence he'd labored for. He would have hardly thought to defend it. It was merely a faith into which he was born, like speech or sight or breathing, but twelve minutes away from his bid for recognition in front of the richest passel of patrons in Europe, he was not so keen on having it tested and so made as if to ease himself past Bellincioni's hovering arm and toward the passageway at the end of which he could already see the herald angel fluffing his wings in preparation for the announcement Leonardo hysterically prayed would be heard in Florence and Venice and Rome, that something had appeared upon the planet's face from which amazement would pour like a river, and its name was Leonardo—or words to that effect. But Bellincioni's hand pushed him back against the stone: You imagine, he whispered, that to be steadfast is for a reason, you imagine it as essential if dominion is to come, but, you see, there's no distinction. Raze these walls and with them goes everything you've learned.

And Leonardo had wrapped his fingers around Bellincioni's skinny wrist determined to rid himself of this pinched mouth, its luxuriant words, the eyes that glistened like freshly squeezed cream, for it was hardly the first time he'd encountered speech's power to lift you in the air just to dash you on the ground, but even as he moved to brush this insect from his face, even as he prepared his body to glide into the passageway from which at this very moment the herald was stepping out into the vast ballroom, Leonardo found himself lingering within the hollow of Bellincioni's voice, feeling with his own right shoulder the crack into which he was



pressing as if to enter a secret there, and suddenly giving way, letting himself collapse against the pink stone, he had recalled an afternoon on Monte Albano when watching a Tuscan girl run through the piebald shade of a cypress grove he had first recognized as something unmistakable and deliriously plain the oneness of color and shape, that as light goes it carries geometry along, and so had understood with a kind of fright why an utterly luminous world would forever hold its peace or shout us deaf and dumb, and as Bellincioni drew his pinched mouth so close that Leonardo smelled the citronella on his gums, Leonardo knew he could reply that Bellincioni was confusing hue with designo, that substance crumbled, form remained, that such a retort, though wholly false, would at least allow him to escape into the passageway where the world might actually call his name. But when Leonardo opened his mouth, all he said was:

Horses?!

Bellincioni chuckled. Look down upon yourself from a great height; be as weightless as you seem; know watchfulness as your mother, but when the world has vanished, remember — no one ever asks were you right; they ask did you conquer. And the words they will use are these: are you still there?

And then Bellincioni may have kissed him. Leonardo will never know. For at this precise second a mighty rush of air arose from the ballroom like the sucking of the earth when Atlantis slid away, and somehow pushing the poet's face aside or dodging his outstretched arm or perhaps simply running right over him, Leonardo had rushed into the passageway in time to see the curtain finish rising on a universe more reliable than any other he'd ever know. The astonished guests at once collapsed into a thunderous beating of tables, benches, cutlery, spoons. The sackbuts blared in a raucous chord. The clown somersaulted into the laps of the squatting Turks. The startled horses overturned trays of soggy fruit and bones picked clean. And as the heavenly choir began to sing, the planets to revolve, the gods to come gracefully down from the sky, with the clamor and shouting growing louder by the minute, Leonardo rested his spine against the doorway, eased himself to the floor and, gazing into the miraculous spectacle of his own mind, tried to believe that feeling this good could never be a lie.