



*Natural History*


Pliny explained that ancient Rome had two populations—those who breathed and those who were made of stone, each taking their place each day at home, in palaces, theaters, piazzas, and baths—and of those who remained in 1506 on the Esquiline Hill, Laocoön was pulled from the earth while Michelangelo and all the artists who had gathered to see began to draw, to speak of how it was too brief, the season of peaches, arctic rose nectarines, and statues rising from the ground—but proof, nonetheless, that the dead can be raised in space chiseled and nudged, chipped and dinged by words (*half-moon, mezzaluna, new moon, knife*) their lips first sealed then parting, respite then reprise, giving in, saying *when*.

*The Queen of Hell*


The long broken sidewalks of the city. The buildings, as bleak and high as cliffs. The long slow dawning of the day, the pale sun reaching. The paint cracking and chipping on the benches. The rubbishy corners of the bus shelters. The public daffodils and tulips, nodding and beckoning on the square, beauty for everyone. Breakfast at Tiffany's. Lunch at the Y. Dinner at the Presbyterian Church on the west side. Long slow afternoons at the library, dust sifting slowly in the beams of yellow light. The glittering twilight, windows winking on one by one. The burning orange streetlights marking a path through the city, as if it were a place in a story, a place where treasure is kept. The coming down of the dark. The cold, the hard, the dark.

There was a story Anne told about herself. She had a job interview and she was on her way, dressed up, suit and heels, hair smooth and curled. Clipping through the city, tripping quickly off the bus, sun shining, résumé in a plastic folder under her arm. What a day, she says. The sky—you think you know blue and there it is, a new kind. One cloud maybe, like a dream of a cloud. The air full of light and a high sweet smell, even over the bus fumes you could smell it. She was waiting at an intersection, waiting for the light, tapping her toes, and there, in front of her, there was a man. A boy maybe, this was a while ago, she was younger herself. Beautiful anyway, and he looked sidelong at her. He was on his way to no job interview, no, he was hanging out, looking for trouble of a pleasant kind. Her story is that instead of crossing at the light when it changed, she stepped off the curb to follow

him when he crossed against the light. She stepped off the curb and walked into the city. No one believes or disbelieves this story.

She says she walked away from her life, like walking away from a car with a purse lying on the seat, snapped shut. The purse is the kind that people's mothers used to carry to church, big and black, filled with secret things.

Her name is Anne just now. When she was young, for a long time, it was Baba. Her baby name, what her younger brother called her. In dreams now, her head restlessly moving on its cardboard pillow, sometimes she is Baba again, sweet Baba, having her hair braided up and fastened with plastic barrettes in the shapes of butterflies or flowers.

Anne has walked away from her life, so now she is homeless, she explains to us. She is homeless, but once or twice a week she meets a man for lunch, Tony, who looks like a hood in a movie about the Mafia. He is some kind of businessman, rich, she doesn't know what he does. It amuses him to take up with her. He knows there is something wrong with her life, but he doesn't want to know what. Tony is rich enough that when he makes obnoxious scenes in restaurants they do not throw him out. Over the bill or the service. Made-up things, Anne says. Sometimes they just eat lunch, sometimes they go to a hotel and screw. Sometimes they stay at the restaurant for hours. Sometimes he is cruel. He gives her money, the amount depending on his mood. She won't let him buy her much except for useless things. Shoes, though—she lets him buy her shoes.

Sometimes she is dirty, but Tony likes this. He holds her hand and spreads out the fingers to look at the dirt under her nails, the smudges on her knuckles. He holds up the lank, oily strands of her hair. She knows better than to wash this away in the ladies' room. Later, after Tony has screwed her, she can have a shower in the hotel. She likes the crisp, chemically cleaned towels. She takes the miniature soaps and tiny bottles of shampoo and conditioner with her. In the wide hotel beds, she enjoys the feel of the clean sheets under her. The ceilings too are clean, she could look at them all day, their smoothness, their whiteness.

Anne says that she doesn't like to go to the country. She used to like it, but not any more. In the summer it's too hot, in the winter too cold. She is telling us this while we sit leaning against a stone railing that looks out over a parking lot and the water beyond it. There is a stone statue here, a man

with a strange foreign hat and a hard name. He helped us in the American Revolution, according to the plaque, which Anne read to us before we sat down. We look at this statue and press our backs against the stone, trying to keep out of the wind, while Anne tells us about how she used to go for drives in the country, on Sundays. She doesn't say who she went with. These drives were long, all day. They would count the cows and horses and red barns as the green fields rose and fell alongside the car in waves. When they came back, the sun would be low and the city streets and buildings would have a yellowish look to them, a golden look, as if they had been dusted with pollen or magic. There was a look to the air as well, Anne says, a richness, as if it was something you could drink. Now you have to drive too far to get there, it's not worth it. Is it? she asks.

We shake our heads, shifting our buttocks on the cement. It wouldn't be so cold if it wasn't for the wind, blowing grit and candy wrappers in our faces. If it wasn't for the cold the cement is holding, and the stone of the railings.

At the Harbor Light, Anne hums during the sermon. Hums and sways on her chair. She is wearing an old pair of jeans that hangs on her hipbones and a striped T-shirt. Her hair is hanging in locks on her neck and shoulders. She has a fever, but she says it is enjoyable, that she likes the heat. She asks us, though, to feel her forehead with the backs of our hands. This is the best way to tell, she says, the only way. She doesn't say who taught her this. When I put my hands against her forehead and her cheeks, she closes her eyes and hums but she will not say the name of the song. She is humming very low. The woman giving the sermon can hear her, I can tell, but she doesn't do anything. The sermon is short when this woman gives it, long when it is the man she works with. This woman stands with her hands flat on the lectern, leaning forward as if she might vault over it, scattering the metal folding chairs and us, the homeless.

As soon as the woman has stopped speaking, Anne turns to us and says that once, a friend of hers came here to the Harbor Light for a joke. He listened to the sermon and ate the soup and crackers at the long bare table. He planned to stay and sleep but in the end he went back to his school, he was a college boy. He thought it was depressing, she says, and she laughs. There is no use in asking Anne if she went to college for she doesn't like to

answer questions. Questions make her feet itch, she says. Anything, if she doesn't like it, she says it makes her feet itch. That night on the cot, I am thinking of the college boy. One of us who sleeps on the women's side says later that Anne talked to herself in the night from the fever, but she couldn't tell what she said. I am thinking about the college boy and Anne, as I think sometimes about Anne and Tony, when I can't help myself.

Anne is pretty, we think. Because she is still young, almost, but also her hair is a nice color, and she has a nice mouth. She has no makeup except for lipstick, which she wears when she meets Tony. She keeps the lipstick tube always in her pocket where it stays warm, she says, from being close to her body. The warm lipstick goes on better. Anne can put the lipstick on without a mirror. She puts it on looking at the ceiling or at the sky. She has a dress that she wears when she sees Tony, a green dress with long sleeves and a short skirt. Her legs look very white when she puts on the green dress, except for her knees, which are pinkish. The dress hasn't got any pockets so she carries her lipstick in her hand.

Anne doesn't always sleep with us, at the one shelter or the other. Sometimes she is gone for a day, two days, a week. She sleeps on the roofs of buildings. She says she sneaks in when the doors are opened for others. No one bothers you on the roof. She has a card that is like a credit card except that it has no letters or logo on it, only a magnetic strip, which she uses to slip locks. It is silver, and when you look at it, it seems three-dimensional, it seems to be a window into someplace deep. The roofs have their own society, she says, the people move from one place to another like flocks of birds, like nomads. They have tiny mirrors strung around their necks to signal from roof to roof. They have nets they weave out of plastic bags to snare pigeons. They dance to the sound of car radios rising from the streets below, one song blending into another all night long. When one of them dies, they take his body or her body and lash it to a chimney so that the birds can pick it clean, an exchange for the bodies of their brothers the roof people have grilled over their trash fires.

We don't know whether to believe her about the roofs, but she says everyone knows about them. The building owners know, the police know, but as long as the roof people don't cause trouble, they are let alone. Some of us want her to tell how to find them, how to join them, but Anne says this

isn't possible. They never let anyone join, not even Anne. She can visit, on the condition of her secrecy, but never stay.

Anne steals, of course, we all do. Thou shalt not steal was a commandment, I don't remember which number. They are written up on the walls of my old church, and I could go and look if I wanted to. If I wanted to walk that long way or had money for the bus. I could sit in the hard wooden pew with my feet up on the kneeler and read on the wall the commandments, all ten of them. There were ten, I think. If Anne would go, I might do this, but she never would. Two of Anne's lipsticks she stole, and a clip she puts in her hair, blue plastic, shaped like a butterfly. It is the only one left of six that came on a card at the drugstore. She steals the tips that Tony leaves on the table at the restaurant sometimes, if he's not looking. She stole a bottle of aspirin from the shelter and she gives it to us if we need it. She steals food when she can, we all do. She steals things from cars that have been left unlocked: a paperback romance book, a pair of dirty socks, some antifreeze. She keeps these things, and the soaps, the little bottles of shampoo and conditioner, in the hallway of the deserted building where we sleep sometimes, behind a radiator.

No one knows about this except me. I saw her one day when she was putting something away. The building was a place where they made bread. It still smells like bread sometimes although it was years ago. Sometimes still you can find a scrap of one of the old bread wrappers, which had red and yellow balloons on them. The bread smell makes us think we are warmer, even though we are lying on the cold floor and the wind is blowing over us, cold from the broken-out windows. Anne likes it there, I know. She likes the wide empty rooms where the bread machinery was kept and the long hallways. She likes the old brickyard where the bread trucks backed in to be loaded. She likes the trees that are growing up through the bricks, a skinny forest of them. When we sleep there, we dream about the bakers, fat men in white pants and aprons and hats, we dream about white slices of bread with yellow butter. We dream that the walls and floors are made of bread and that it is so soft and fine that we are sinking down through it, down through layers and layers of the bread building, and there is no bottom to it.

The soup place where we go on Thursdays is run by mostly nuns. You can tell the nuns, Anne says, by their hair, which is extra neat, and the pastel colors they wear. There is something about the way they hold their faces, their lips firmly together, their eyes wide open. You know their bureau drawers are neat, Anne says, they fold their underwear for sure. Anne says that she went to a school run by nuns, long ago. She says that she had an aunt that was a nun, so old that she still wore the habit long after the others had given it up. She made Anne kneel and pray the rosary with her whenever she could. They had to kneel on the hard floor for as long as it took. Anne shows us how she knelt, getting down on the floor by the table where we are eating our chili-mac and carrot sticks. She kneels with her back very straight, the soles of her feet turned up, her hands clasped. Her aunt had told her that the little pain of kneeling on the hard floor was good practice for anyone who had to suffer the ways of the world.

Anne asks us to kneel down with her and try it, but no one wants to. We are eating our vanilla pudding which is good and sweet and thick. I want to kneel, a little, but there is the whipped cream. Each dish of pudding has a little curl of it which most of us eat around, saving it for last. I say I will kneel in a minute, if she will wait, but the nuns are looking over at us. Anne calls to them. Do they have a rosary? She has lost hers, which she got for her first Communion. It was so beautiful that you could have worn it for a necklace. Glass beads like diamonds, on a golden chain. When she prayed with it she wound it around her hands. She walks over to the nuns on her knees, keeping her hands clasped. Asking them if they have a rosary, even if it's an ugly one, she won't mind. The floor is splintery and rough and when Anne gets up there is blood on her knees. We eat our pudding very quickly and go out, taking Anne with us. I hold the last spoonful of pudding in my mouth, the whipped cream spoonful.

When Anne goes to see Tony sometimes I walk with her. I go with her to the restaurant and watch her go in. I can see her through the window if I don't leave. If I go across the street to the little park that is there and sit on the concrete wall. I can see her and Tony eating, like television with the sound off. Tony is a big man with black hair, not very old, but not young. He loosens his tie before he eats anything. Anne sits up very straight on her side of the table. She smooths her green dress over her thighs. When she eats

anything she takes small bites. She likes to eat sandwiches best, which come stuck together with fancy toothpicks. She never eats the pickle, Tony eats it. He eats anything she leaves on her plate. He picks up crumbs from the table with his licked finger and eats them. He talks to Anne while they are eating and reads the paper and calls to the waitresses to come and bring him more of something.

Sometimes they don't stay long and as soon as Tony has eaten everything, they leave. Tony has his big car parked out front and they drive away. The places they go are out in the suburbs, Anne says. Long motels with fenced-in pools and stacked-up lounge chairs. Machines that make ice. A machine that sells crackers and candy bars and Coke. A bar that is always dark inside, even in the middle of the day it's dark. They go to different ones, but the clerk always seems to know Tony. The clerk always looks at Anne's legs, her long white legs under her short green skirt. In the motel room, Tony always takes off his shoes and puts his wallet on the dresser. He always turns the TV on, and he leaves it on all the while they are there, and he doesn't even turn it off when they leave, so that the sound of it follows them out the door. Daytime TV. Soaps, talk shows, old comedies. Anne hates them. If she ever has a house, she says, no one will ever watch TV, in fact, there will be no TV at all.

When Anne comes back from having lunch with Tony she is clean. She has taken a shower in the motel room, or sometimes a bath. She has washed her hair so that it stands out from her head in a light-colored cloud. She lifts up her hair so that we can see how clean the back of her neck is. Some of us do not believe in this much cleanness. Some of us believe that the dirt is a kind of protection, from cold and germs and other kinds of harm. But we can still admire the whiteness of Anne's skin and her bravery. Her willingness to wash everything away.

Anne's back is bony, the shoulder blades like hooks. Sometimes, at night, we have been to the beach. It is possible to wait in the scrubby bushes and long grass until the lifeguards leave, until after the police car has driven slowly around the parking lot. We have bathed in the dark water, swimming the dirt away. Some of us go in our clothes, but Anne takes hers off. Her body in the dark water is like a fish. She says she will swim to Canada one day, and we all look out over the dark waves to where Canada is although

we cannot see it. There's no difference, Anne says, if you're swimming in water that is six feet deep or sixty. You only have to keep from putting your foot down to feel for the bottom. The idea of Anne swimming over the surface of water that is too deep makes me feel sick. I have a picture of it in my mind where the water looks like a black skating rink, or a black tile floor, smooth and shiny, and Anne's white body moving across the top of it, sliding almost, her breasts and belly and her long white legs pressed against the shiny blackness and moving over the skin of the surface. Underneath is the water, the deep. This fills my head and makes me feel sick, my stomach dropping like in the elevator.

We sleep on the sand, in hollows we have dug out for ourselves. Close to the trees, we are invisible in the night. The sky hangs over us like the mouth of a cave.

When we walk, our knees hurt. The bottoms of our feet. The thing to do is walk on the grass if there is any, not on the sidewalk. Downtown is all sidewalk, hard concrete and stone and bricks. Even the parks are paved over with circles and squares and diamonds where trees and bushes poke through. You can walk farther if you stop thinking. It is like falling asleep, you are asleep but you are walking. One foot forward, then the other. One then the other. If you have a cart you can lean on it. If you hunch forward, rounding your shoulders and ducking your head, the wind is not so bad. If you stay close to the buildings. But Anne keeps her back straight. Good posture is important, she reminds us. If possible we ought to be walking with a book on our heads, once a week maybe, for practice. We have no books. Newspapers will not work, they will blow away. One of us laughs. About the book on the head or something else.

One of the places Anne meets Tony is fixed up like a diner from the '50s, except that all the furnishings are very expensive. Last week they were there. They're there and Tony is in a bad mood. Anne has a club sandwich. She has eaten only one triangle of it. Tony is hitting his empty plate with a pencil. He wants her to give him some of her sandwich and she does. The table is littered with lunch and drinks and Tony's papers and newspapers. The restaurant is mauve and gray and silver, the table is mauve Formica. The bill comes. He makes a joke to the waitress, then starts to give Anne a hard time about how much she ate, although she has eaten less than half of her

sandwich, none of her French fries. He hits the table, making the plates rattle, and the people at the next table look the other way. Anne sits there calmly while he strides to the desk. He yells at the person there, yells and throws down the bill and walks out. For a minute after he leaves, Anne stays and looks at the wine list. She reads it as if she wants to check what would be a good wine to have with a club sandwich. If she ever comes here again.

When she goes out, he has gone. The sun is hot, the street almost empty. She starts to walk. The sidewalks are the kind that glitter, little chips of light. The air is still and she walks through it slowly, as if she is swimming. She is still hungry. There is a long scrape on one of her legs and she walks close to the buildings. Her feet move over the sidewalks and it is as if the glittering specks in them are stabbing her. The air is heavy and it presses down on her. If she stands still, her eyes will close and she will begin to dream. If she stands for even one minute. Even only to wait for the traffic light to change. She will begin to dream about Tony, the motel room, the eye of the television, the magazines he brings with him sometimes, the leathery smell of his wallet, leather and sweat.

Or she will dream about trying on clothes in a small dressing room with another woman, the clothes flying from the hangers and pausing to rest for a minute on Anne's body before they fall to a pile on the floor by the mirror. The woman is watching in the dream but Anne can't see her. She can't see her but she can hear her rustling in disapproval, shifting position. None of the clothes are any good. None of them make Anne's body do what it should.

Or she will dream about the future, which is a grayness, shot through with streaks of light and color that hurt Anne's eyes. The future is rolling itself up into a ball, it is picking up its bags and going away. It is grainy and chewy as an old piece of gum. There are windows in this dream, but there is nothing on the other side of them. They are like dark mirrors, and their curtains are always being drawn across them, Anne says.

She didn't want to see any of these things, so she didn't stop walking. When she came to a street, she went across it at a steady pace, slowly, giving the cars plenty of time to pass. Her eyes always wide open.

I know all this because she told me.