

There wasn't a face among them that I recognized. It was too late. They were too old, too young, too cheerful, too melancholy, and by that time I myself was probably too helpless.

I knew that my age was winning. I wasn't keeping my eyes up, searching faces in the street in the same way that I used to. As I dragged reluctant feet home across the defeated concrete, the toes of my shabby brown boots caught on the edges of uneven slabs. I heard my mother's voice. "Pick your feet up," she said, and guiltily I obeyed. It wasn't so long ago I hadn't had to think about it.

I switched from the over-populated street to a footpath that I knew ran through the park, along the river. Not only was it a faster route, I knew it would be quieter here, at two-thirty on a Tuesday afternoon that had already been surrendered to the office blocks without a prolonged struggle. I watched the ducks chasing one another on the river for a while, grateful for the chance to let my gaze slide over rounded beaks and waxy feathers that, to me at least, were not distinguishing features. I admit I had made enough minute examinations of human nose-bridges in the last eight years to weary me.

The ducks were not the only ones embracing the onslaught of Spring with enthusiasm. Everywhere I looked, shy revelations of new green flesh were commencing. Freshly-healed, the scar tissue formed in winter was slowly exposing itself for the first time, brave in its readiness to test its own endurance, alone for the first time in a hard world as the protective dead skin fell away in acceptance of its own obsolescence. Springtime never made me feel young.

There was an older man on one of the benches, alone under a beech tree whose bright, round leaves wrinkled in sympathy. My uncommunicative associate, he said nothing and his eyes remained still, keeping to themselves whatever secrets it were that the world, after a prolonged and painstaking examination, had grudgingly yielded up to him. I couldn't blame him. My own knuckles were chapped and sore from the cold and beating the hell out of life, but arthritis had swollen his to gorged, purpled berries clustered at the centres of his dry, bunch-of-twigs fists. I wanted to make him a gift of my battered suede gloves, but something made me doubt he'd accept.

I walked on, along the muted path that seemed so entirely ours, two hundred yards at most from the main street and the city walls, locked in the unending stalemate of their own desperate bids to draw people in, and to bar their admittance. And yet my own exile was one of self-election. An inflated sense of my own martyrdom, perhaps, drew me away from the cobbled crowds in the quaintly glossed shopping streets whose great, gleaming mouths screamed "Sale!" at the hungered draggers of fattened plastic carrier bags. "Closing down!" they yelled distractingly, "Everything must go!" So what? I thought, on those occasions when I didn't need a dress or a belt or a set of thirty coloured clothes-pegs. Closing down? Big Deal. Who isn't?

But here, in the park, I was divorced from all that. I was neither a consuming nor a marketable object. I didn't notice the faded colour of my jacket-cuffs so much, either. I reached the edges of the grass, where the path widened to a broad, open walkway lined

with sycamores and graffiti-spattered corrugated iron. Often you'd see students cycling along here on mud-caked mountain bikes, wearing immaculately scruffy jeans, frayed straps of weighty-looking backpacks flying. You could usually pick out the academics who had recommended the books that seemed to hang from their bones, too: the bicycles were older, cleaner, the trousers tighter, neater, occasionally succumbing to the stern but masterful restraint administered by a steel bicycle clip, deftly applied just below shin-level. The young twenty-somethings sweated in their consuming sense of destination. The lecturers wore only dry expressions of concentration, and never seemed to notice the physical exertion that propelled them ever-closer to their desks and their lecterns and the library shelves.

I reached the old railway bridge which functioned as the gate between the tourist's quarter and the back alleys that riddled the rough, sub-urban estates carved out toward the city's edge, and which, on sight prompted the passer-by to remember the pawn shops and "adult" retailers' he'd not noticed yourself hastening past on the main street. Each step moved me closer to my door, and to the cup of tea and cheese and pickle sandwich that would indifferently signal the end of another morning in which I had not found him.