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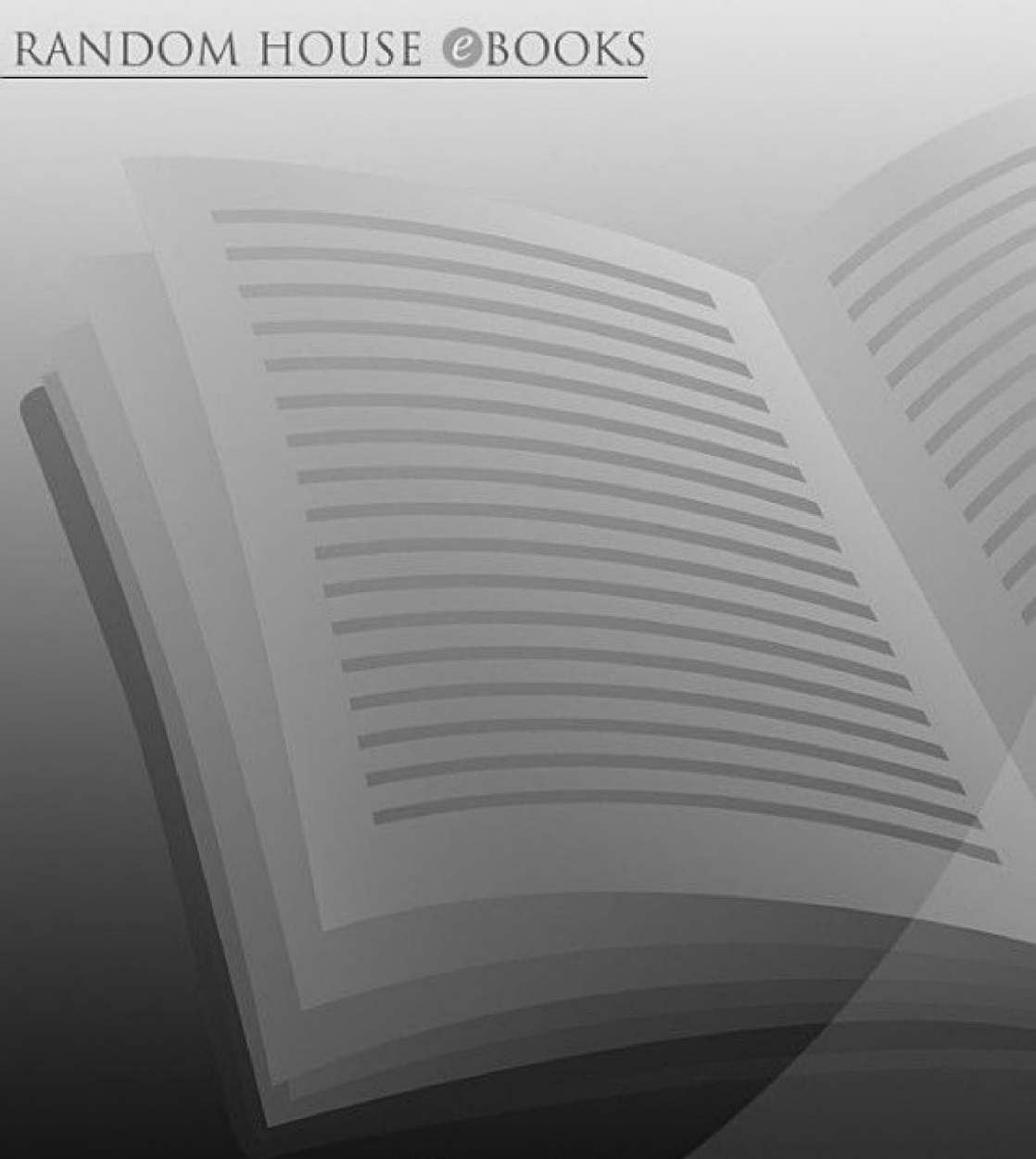

The Last Samurai

Helen Dewitt

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Contents

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To
Ann Cotton

The Last Samurai

Daughter of an American diplomat, Helen DeWitt grew up in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador. She started a degree at Smith College and dropped out twice, the first time to read Proust and Eliot while working as a chambermaid, the second time to take the Oxford entrance exam. She read Literae Humaniores at Lady Margaret Hall, went to Brasenose College to do a doctorate in Greek and Latin literature then spent a year at Somerville College as a junior research fellow. In 1988 she started her first novel. Over the next decade she started work on around 50 other novels while working as a doughnut salesperson, dictionary text tagger, copytaker, fundraiser, management consultant and night secretary for a Wall Street law firm's London office. *The Last Samurai* is her first finished novel; rights to it have been sold in 13 countries. Helen DeWitt lives in London.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1991 Ann Cotton went to a school in Mola, a village in a remote rural district of Zimbabwe, with the idea of doing research on girls' education. She ended up talking to two schoolgirls who had come 100 km alone to attend the school. It did not take boarders, so they were living in a hut they had built themselves. They considered themselves lucky because most girls could not go to secondary school, as fees were charged; they dropped out and got married at twelve or thirteen instead. Ann went back to Britain and started raising money for scholarships by selling cakes in Cambridge Market. She founded the Cambridge Female Education Trust in 1993. She persuaded the Body Shop to fund a hostel in Mola. She persuaded other organisations to fund scholarships for more schools, first in Zimbabwe, then in Ghana. She persuaded me to become a Trustee; I could not have finished this book if she had not said 'Of course' each time I said I would do something for CamFed as soon as I had finished my book. Information about CamFed is available from 25 Wordsworth Grove, Newnham, Cambridge CB3 9HH and at http://www.camfed.org.

Professor David Levene has made the book more interesting and less prone to error in too many ways to count; it is impossible to express my debt to his unfailing generosity. I owe more than I can say to my mother, Mary DeWitt Griffin, not only for moral and financial support, but for sharing her remarkable gifts over the course of many years. Tim Schmidt, Maude Chilton and Steve Hutensky have been extraordinary friends; they know how much I owe them.

Alison Samuel of Chatto & Windus brought a fresh eye and keen attention to detail to bear at a stage when both were much needed. I am also grateful to Martin Lam, author of *Kanji from the Start*, for advice on the Nisus

program, and to Neil and Fusa McLynn for extensive help with Japanese; also to Leonard Gamberg for casting an eye over the atom, to Chris Done for looking at the astronomy in an early version, to James Kaler for kindly answering a question at the very last minute raised by *Stars and their Spectra*, and to Ian Rutherford for finding a Greek font at the postultimate minute. It should go without saying that they are in no way implicated in any mistakes that remain. I owe a special debt to the many people who helped me appreciate the achievement of Akira Kurosawa; the book would have been very different without their assistance.

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Prologue

My father's father was a Methodist minister. He was a tall, handsome, noble-looking man; he had a deep, beautiful voice. My father was an ardent atheist and admirer of Clarence Darrow. He skipped grades the way other boys skip class, he lectured my grandfather's flock on carbon 14 and the origin of species, and he won a full scholarship to Harvard at the age of 15.

He took the letter from Harvard to his father.

Something looked through my grandfather's beautiful eyes. Something spoke with his beautiful voice, and it said: It's only fair to give the other side a chance.

My father said: What do you mean?

What it meant was that my father should not reject God for secularism just because he won arguments with uneducated people. He should go to a theological college and give the other side a fair chance; if he was still of the same mind at the end he would still be only 19, a perfectly good age to start college.

My father, being an atheist and a Darwinist, had a very delicate sense of honor, and he could not resist this appeal. He applied to various theological seminaries, and all but three rejected him out of hand because he was too young. Three asked him to come for an interview.

The first was a seminary with a fine reputation, and my father because of his youth was interviewed by the head.

The man said: You're very young. Is it possible that you want to be a minister because of your father?

My father said he did not want to be a minister, but he wanted to give the other side a fair chance, and he explained about carbon 14.

The man said: The ministry is a vocation and the training we offer is designed for people who feel called to it. I doubt very much that you would

benefit from it.

He said: This offer from Harvard is a remarkable opportunity. Couldn't you give the other side a fair chance by taking a course in theology? I believe the college started out, after all, as a College of Divinity, and I imagine they must still teach the subject.

The man smiled at my father kindly and he offered to give him a list of books to read if he would like to do any more in the way of giving the other side a fair chance. My father drove home (they were living in Sioux City at the time) and all the way he thought that this might give the other side a fair chance.

He spoke to his father. The point was made that one course in theology in a strongly secular environment would probably not make a very considerable impact, but all the same my father must decide for himself.

My father went to the second seminary, which had a good reputation. He was interviewed by the Dean.

The Dean asked him why he wanted to become a minister, and my father explained that he did not want to become a minister, and he explained about carbon 14.

The Dean said he respected my father's intentions, but still there was something whimsical about it, and he pointed out that my father was very young. He recommended that my father go to Harvard first and then if he still wanted to give the other side a fair chance he would be delighted to consider his application.

My father returned to his father. The beautiful voice pointed out that a man with a degree from Harvard would find it hard to resist the temptation of going instantly into a career, but it said that of course my father must decide for himself.

My father drove to the third seminary, which was small and obscure. My father was interviewed by a Deputy Dean. It was a hot day, and though a small fan was blowing the Deputy Dean, a red fat man, was sweating hard. The Deputy Dean asked why my father wanted to be a minister and my father explained about the fair chance and about carbon 14.

The Deputy Dean said that the church paid the fees of the seminarians who planned to become ministers. He said that as my father did not plan to become a minister they would have to charge $1,500 a year.

My father returned to his father, who said that he supposed my father could earn $750 over the summer at one of the gas stations, and that he would then give him the rest.

So my father went to a theological college. When I say that he went to a theological college I mean that he enrolled at a theological college & went every Saturday to synagogue out of interest because there was no rule to say you couldn't, and spent most of the rest of the time shooting pool at Helene's, the only bar in town that would serve a 16-year-old.

He waited for my grandfather to ask how he was finding it, but my grandfather never asked.

At the synagogue my father met someone ten years older who ran the services and did most of the readings. He looked a lot like Buddy Holly, and in fact people called him Buddy (he preferred it to Werner). At first my father thought this was the rabbi, but the town was too small to support a rabbi: The services were run by local volunteers. Buddy had wanted to be an opera singer, but his father had insisted he train as an accountant, and he had come from Philadelphia to take up a job as an accountant. He too spent a lot of time shooting pool at Helene's.

By the end of three years my father was very good at shooting pool. He had saved up about $500 from his winnings, and he played carelessly so as not to win too much or too often. He could beat everyone in the bar, but one night a stranger came in.

By some accident the stranger played everyone else first. He played with smooth, economical movements, and it was obvious he was in a different class from anyone my father had played so far. My father wanted to play him; Buddy kept trying to warn him off. He thought there was something not quite right about the stranger; either he would win more than my father could afford to lose, or he would lose and pull a gun. My father thought this was ridiculous, but then the stranger's jacket rode up as he bent over and

they saw a gun strapped to his waist.

The game came to an end and my father walked up. He said: My friend here says you're dangerous.

The stranger said: I can be.

My father said grinning broadly: He says you'll kill me if I win.

The stranger said: Are you so sure you'll win?

My father said: There's only one way to find out.

The stranger said: And who might you be?

My father said he was at the seminary.

The stranger expressed surprise at finding a seminarian in the bar.

My father said We are all sinners, brother, in a rather sarcastic tone of voice.

The stranger and my father played a game and five dollars changed hands.

The stranger said: Do you want your revenge?

They played another game which took longer. My father was still playing carelessly; he naturally did not talk while the stranger was playing, but when it was his own turn he answered the stranger's questions with sarcastic stories about the seminary. The stranger was a man of few words, but he seemed amused. My father won in the end with a lucky shot and five dollars changed hands.

The stranger said: Now let's make it interesting.

My father said: How interesting do you want to make it?

The stranger asked how much money my father had in the world and Buddy Holly mouthed the words NO NO Don't tell him you stupid jerk from behind his back and my father said he had $500.

The stranger said he would give any odds against the $500. My father couldn't tell if he was serious.

He said: A hundred bucks. Best of five.

The stranger said in that case he'd like to see the color of his money, because he had to get back on the road and he was not going to hang around for a hundred bucks. He said 5 to 1.

My father had $25 on him. He borrowed $25 from Buddy and the rest in tens and fives from people in the bar who knew he was good for it.

They played two games and the stranger won them both easily. They started the third game and the stranger began to win easily, but then my father's luck turned and he pulled himself together and won. He won the fourth game, though it was a hard fight, and then he won the fifth game and it was silent in the bar. Other people in the bar had seen the gun too.

The stranger reached inside his jacket and everyone froze. Then he took out a wallet. He extracted five $100 bills from a thick stack.

He said: I don't suppose you've had this much money all at one time before.

My father pointed out that he already had $500.

The stranger said: $1,000! That's a lot of money.

He said: I hate to see a man with money who doesn't know what to do with it.

My father said: What do you mean?

The stranger said if you knew something a little ahead of other folks you could sometimes make money if you already had money.

My father said: What do you know?

The stranger said he wouldn't be surprised if the new highway was built that way.

My father said: If you know that for a fact why don't you do something about it? Buy some real estate.

The stranger said: I don't like property. It ties you down. But if I didn't mind owning property, and I had $1,000, I'd know what to do with the money.

The bar closed and the stranger drove off. It happened that Mrs. Randolph, Buddy's landlady, wanted to sell her house and move to Florida, but no one was buying. My father pointed out that if the stranger was right they could buy this house and turn it into a motel and make a lot of money.

If, said Buddy.

The fact was that they were both convinced that the stranger knew what

he was talking about; the gun lent a mysterious conviction to the story.

My father said he wasn't going to have time for that though, because once he was through with the seminary he was going to Harvard. He had written to Harvard to take up the earlier offer.

A few weeks went by. A letter came from Harvard explaining that they would like to see what he had been doing for the past few years and asking for his grades and a reference. My father provided these, and a couple of months went by. One day a letter came which must have been hard to write. It said Harvard was prepared to offer him a place based on his earlier record, and it went on to explain that scholarships however were awarded purely on merit, so that it would not be fair to other students to give one to someone with a D average. It said that if he chose to take up the place he would need to pay the normal cost of tuition.

My father went home to Sioux City for Easter. Buddy went home to Philadelphia to celebrate Passover. My father took the letter to his father.

My grandfather looked at the letter from Harvard, and he said that he believed it was God's will that my father should not go to Harvard.

Four years earlier my father had had a brilliant future. Now he faced life with a mediocre degree from an obscure theological college, a qualification absolutely useless to a man incapable of entering the ministry.

My father was struck speechless with disgust. He left the house without a word. He drove a Chevrolet 1,300 miles.

In later years my father sometimes played a game. He'd meet a man on his way to Mexico and he'd say, Here's fifty bucks, do me a favor and buy me some lottery tickets, and he'd give the man his card. Say the odds against winning the jackpot were 20 million to 1 and the odds against the man giving my father the winning ticket another 20 million to 1, you couldn't say my father's life was ruined because there was a 1 in 400 trillion chance that it wasn't.

Or my father might meet a man on his way to Europe and he'd say, Here's fifty bucks, if you happen to go to Monte Carlo do me a favor, go to the roulette table and put this on number 17 and keep it there for 17 spins

of the wheel, the man would say he wasn't planning to go to Monte Carlo and my father would say But if you do and he'd give him his card. Because what were the odds that the man would change his plans and go to Monte Carlo, what were the odds that 17 would come up 17 times in a row, what were the odds that if it did the man would send the money on to my father? Whatever they were it was not absolutely impossible but only highly unlikely, and it was not absolutely certain that my grandfather had destroyed him because there was a 1 in 500 trillion trillion trillion chance that he had not.

My father played the game for a long time because he felt he should give my grandfather a sporting chance. I don't know when he played it for the last time, but the first time was when he left the house without a word and drove 1,300 miles to see Buddy in Philadelphia.

My father parked in front of Buddy's house. A piece of piano music was being played loudly and bitterly in the front room. Doors were slammed. There were loud voices. Somebody screamed. The piano was silent. Somebody started playing the piano loudly and bitterly.

My father found Buddy who explained what was going on.

Buddy had wanted to be an opera singer and was an accountant. His brother Danny had wanted to be a clarinettist and worked in his father's jewelry business. His sister Frieda had wanted to be a violinist and worked as a secretary before marrying and having three children. His sister Barbara had wanted to be a violinist and worked as a secretary before marrying and having two children. His youngest sister, Linda, wanted to be a singer and she had now refused point-blank to go to secretarial college; his father had refused pointblank to let her study music. Linda had gone to the piano and begun to play Chopin's Prelude No. 24 in D minor, a bitter piece of music which gains in tragic intensity when played 40 times in a row.

The fact was that their father was Viennese and had very high standards. The children could all play five or six instruments with flair but they hated to practice: They emerged from each piece either bloody but unbowed or miraculously unscathed, and they had all assumed they would

be musicians. Buddy was the first to find they would not. Mr. Konigsberg thought that either you had talent or you did not; none of his children played like a Heifetz or a Casals or a Rubinstein, therefore they did not have the talent to be professionals; therefore they would be better off just enjoying their music, and he explained when Buddy finished high school that he thought he should be an accountant.

Buddy said to my father: You know at the time I didn't want to upset my father, I didn't want to make a big thing of it, I thought who am I to say I could be a singer, but then all the others gave in without an argument. I keep thinking, what if it's my fault? If I'd put my foot down maybe my father would have gotten used to the idea whereas instead they all thought they didn't have a choice, I keep thinking what if it's all my fault?

& he waited hopefully—

& my father said: Of course it's your fault. Why didn't you stand up to him? You let the whole side down. The *least* you can do is make sure it doesn't happen again.

My father knew that he would always hate himself for respecting his own father's wishes, and he now thought that at least someone else could avoid this mistake.

Does she have a place? he asked.

No, said Buddy.

Well she should go for an audition, said my father, and he went into the front room followed by Buddy to argue for this point of view.

In the front room was a 17-year-old girl with fierce black hair, fierce black eyes & ferocious red lipstick. She did not look up because she was halfway through her 41st consecutive rendition of Chopin's Prelude No. 24 in D minor.

My father stood by the piano and he suddenly thought What would be the odds against going to a seminary and going to *synagogue* and learning to play *pool*, just suppose he fell in love with a Jewish girl from Philadelphia and made a fortune in motels and lived happily ever after, say the odds were a billion to one that was still not the same as impossible so it was not

actually impossible that his father had not, in fact—

Linda plunged down to the bass and hammered out three bitter low notes. Doom. Doom. Doom.

The piece was over. She looked up before starting again.

Who are you? she said.

Buddy introduced my father.

Oh, the atheist, said my mother.

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– Let's make bamboo spears! Let's kill all the bandits!
– You can't.
– That's impossible.

Three farmers (Seven Samurai)

A small village is yearly invaded by bandits and the farmers lose their crops and sometimes their lives. This year the elders decide to do something about it. They have heard of a village which once hired masterless samurai and was saved. They decide to do the same and send some of their number to search for willing samurai. Since there is no pay, merely food, a place to sleep, and the fun of fighting, the farmers are fortunate that they first meet Kambei (Takashi Shimura), a strong and dedicated man who decides to make their cause his own. A young *ronin*, Katsushiro (Ko Kimura) joins him, then he accidentally meets an old friend, Shichiroji (Daisuke Kato). He himself chooses Gorobei (Yoshio Inaba) who in turn chooses Heihachi (Minoru Chiaki). A master swordsman, Kyuzo (Seiji Miyoguchi) joins, and so, eventually, does Kikuchiyo (Toshiro Mifune), a farmer's son himself, who has been following them around for some time, attracted—as all of them are—by Kambei.

Once in the village they prepare for war. Not waiting for the first attack, they storm the bandits' fort, burn it and kill a number of the bandits—though Heihachi is also killed. The bandits attack the village and they repulse them, though Gorobei is killed. Then they hit upon the plan of allowing a few in and spearing them to death. In the final battle both Kyuzo and Kikuchiyo are killed—but the bandits are all dead.

It is spring, once more the rice-planting season has come. Of the original seven samurai, only three are left and they soon will go their separate ways.

Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*

1

Do Samurai Speak Penguin Japanese?

There are 60 million people in Britain. There are 200 million in America. (Can that be right?) How many millions of English-speakers other nations might add to the total I cannot even guess. I would be willing to bet, though, that in all those hundreds of millions not more than 50, at the outside, have read A. Roemer, *Aristarchs Athetesen in der Homerkritik* (Leipzig, 1912), a work untranslated from its native German and destined to remain so till the end of time.

I joined the tiny band in 1985. I was 23.

The first sentence of this little-known work runs as follows:

Es ist wirklich Brach- und Neufeld, welches der Verfasser mit der Bearbeitung dieses Themas betreten und durchpflügt hat, so sonderbar auch diese Behauptung im ersten Augenblick klingen mag.

I had taught myself German out of *Teach Yourself German*, and I recognised several words in this sentence at once:

It is truly something and something which the something with the something of this something has something and something, so something also this something might something at first something.

I deciphered the rest of the sentence by looking up the words Brachfeld, Neufeld, Verfasser, Bearbeitung, Themas, betreten, durchpflügt, sonderbar, Behauptung, Augenblick and klingen in Langenscheidt's German-English dictionary.

This would have been embarrassing if I had been reading under the eyes of people I knew, since I should have been on top of German by now; I should not have frittered away my time at Oxford infiltrating classes on Akkadian, Arabic, Aramaic, Hittite, Pali, Sanskrit and Dialects of the Yemen (not to mention advanced papyrology and intermediate hieroglyphics) instead of advancing the frontiers of human knowledge. The problem is that

if you have grown up in the type of place that is excited to be getting its first motel, the type of place that is only dimly (if, indeed, at all) aware of the very *existence* of the Yemen, you want to study dialects of the Yemen if you can because you think you may well not get another chance. I had lied about everything but my height and my weight to get into Oxford (my father, after all, had shown what can happen if you let other people supply your references and your grades) and I wanted to make the most of my time.

The fact that I had completed an undergraduate degree and gone on to get a scholarship to do research just showed how much more appropriate the grades and references were which I had provided myself (straight As, natürlich; lines like 'Sibylla has wide-ranging interests and an extraordinarily original mind; she is a joy to teach') than anything anyone I knew would have come up with. The only problem was that now I had to do the research. The only problem was that when a member of the scholarship committee had said, 'You're on top of German of course,' I had said airily, 'Of course.' It *could* have been true.

Roemer, anyway, was too obscure to be on the open shelves of the Lower Reading Room with more frequently consulted classical texts. Year after year the book gathered dust in the dark, far below ground. Since it had to be called up from the stacks it could be sent to any reading room in the Bodleian, and I had had it sent to Reserve in the Upper Reading Room of the Radcliffe Camera, a library in a dome of stone in the centre of a square. I could read unobserved.

I sat in the gallery looking out across a bell of air, or at the curving walls crammed with extraordinarily interesting-looking books on non-classical subjects, or out the window at the pale stone of All Souls, or, of course, at *Aristarchs Athetesen in der Homerkritik* (Leipzig, 1912). There was not a classicist in sight.

I formed the impression that the sentence meant: It is truly a fallow and new field which the author has trod and ploughed through in handling this subject, so especially might this statement sound in the first moment.

This did not really seem worth the trouble it had taken to work it out, but I had to go on so I went on, or rather I was about to go on when I glanced up and I happened to see, on a shelf to my left, a book on the Thirty Years War which looked extraordinarily interesting. I took it down and it really was extraordinarily interesting and I looked up presently and it was time for lunch.

I went to the Covered Market and spent an hour looking at sweaters.

There are people who think contraception is immoral because the object of copulation is procreation. In a similar way there are people who think the only reason to read a book is to write a book; people should call up books from the dust and the dark and write thousands of words to be sent down to the dust and the dark which can be called up so that other people can send further thousands of words to join them in the dust and the dark. Sometimes a book can be called from the dust and the dark to produce a book which can be bought in shops, and perhaps it is interesting, but the people who buy it and read it because it is interesting are not serious people, if they were serious they would not care about the interest they would be writing thousands of words to consign to the dust and the dark.

There are people who think death a fate worse than boredom.

I saw several interesting sweaters in the Market but they seemed to be rather expensive.

I tore myself away at last and returned to the fray.

It is truly a fallow and new field which the author has trod and ploughed through in handling this subject, so especially might this statement sound in the first moment, I reminded myself.

It seemed extraordinarily uninteresting.

I went on to work through the second sentence, ratio of profit to expense as before, and the sentence after that and the one after that. It took five to ten minutes to read a sentence—an hour a page. Slowly the outlines of the argument loomed out of the mist, like Debussy's drowned cathedral sortant peu à peu de la brume.

In La Cathédrale Engloutie chords of melancholy grandeur break out, at

last, *ff* !!!! But when, after some 30 hours or so, I began at last to understand —

49 people in the English-speaking world know what lay in wait. No one else knows or cares. And yet how much hangs on this moment of revelation! It is only if we can conceive of the world without Newton, without Einstein, without Mozart, that we can imagine the difference between this world and the world in which I close *Aristarchs Athetesen* after two sentences and take out *Schachnovelle* in cool disregard of the terms of my scholarship. If I had not read Roemer I would not have known I could not be a scholar, I would never have met Liberace (no, not the) and the world would be short a—

I am saying more than I know. One thing at a time. I read Roemer day after day, and after 30 hours or so enlightenment came not in an hour of gold but an hour of lead.

Some 2,300 years ago Alexander the Great set out from Macedonia to conquer everything in his path. He conquered his way down to Egypt and founded the city of Alexandria, then went on to conquer his way east and die, leaving his followers to fight over his conquests. Ptolemy was already governor of Egypt, and kept it. He ruled the country from Alexandria, and it was he who set up one of the many splendours of the city: a Library built up through an acquisitions policy of singleminded ruthlessness.

The invention of the printing press lay as far ahead of them as the wonders of the 3700s from us; all books were copied out by hand. Mistakes crept in, especially if you were copying a copy of a copy of a copy; sometimes the copyist would have a bright idea and add bogus lines or even entire bogus passages, and then everyone after him would innocently copy the bright idea along with the rest. One solution was to get as close to the original as you could. The Library paid the Athenian public record office a massive deposit to borrow the original manuscripts of the whole of Greek tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, the lot) and make copies. It then made sure of having the best possible version by the simple expedient of keeping the originals, returning the copies and forfeiting the deposit.

So far, so not wildly exciting, and yet so much could be said, all

fascinating, about the Library and Alexandria and the mad people who lived there, for the writers alone must be the most perverse and wilful the world has ever known. There are people who, needing a place to put umbrellas, go to Ikea and purchase an umbrella stand for easy home assembly—and there are people who drive 100 miles to an auction in the heart of Shropshire and spot the potential in an apparently pointless 17th-century farming implement. The Alexandrians would have been bidding against each other at the auction. They loved to rifle the works of the past (conveniently available in a Library built up by a ruthless acquisitions policy), turn up rare words which were no longer understood let alone used, and deploy them as more interesting alternatives to words people might actually understand. They loved myths in which people went berserk or drank magic potions or turned into rocks in moments of stress; they loved scenes in which people who had gone berserk raved in strange, fractured speeches studded with unjustly neglected vocabulary; they loved to focus on some trivial element of a myth and spin it out and skip the myth—they could make a *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* of any *Hamlet*. As scholars, as scientists, as mathematicians, as poets who led the flower of Roman youth astray, they crowd their way into books not mainly about them; given a book to themselves they burst out at once into a whole separate volume of footnotes—I speak of course of Fraser's *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, a book I would come back from the grave to possess (I asked for it on my deathbed once and didn't get it). But time is short—the Boy Wonder is watching the video, who knows for how long—what was Roemer's contribution to this marvellous subject?

Roemer was interested in the Homeric criticism of Aristarchus, who was head of the Library a little after 180 BC (the unpleasantness about the tragedies was before his time). Aristarchus had wanted a perfect text of Homer; since an original manuscript did not exist, ruthlessness and cash were not enough: he had to compare copies and spot mistakes. He marked for deletion (athetised) lines he thought did not belong in the text, and was the first to write down his reasoning in commentaries. Nothing by Aristarchus survived. There were marginal notes on the *Iliad* that named no

names but were probably third-hand extracts from Aristarchus; there were a few other notes that named names.

Some of the third-hand extracts struck Roemer as brilliant: they were clearly by Aristarchus, who was clearly a genius. Other extracts were too stupid for a genius: clearly by someone else. Whenever someone else was said to have said something brilliant he saw instantly that it was really by Aristarchus, and if any brilliant comments happened to be lying around unclaimed he instantly spotted the unnamed mastermind behind them.

Now it is patently, blatantly obvious that this is insane. If you are going to shuffle all the names around so that one person is always the genius, this means that you have decided not to believe your source whenever it says someone else said something good or the genius said something bad—but the source is your only reason for thinking the genius was a genius in the first place. Anyone who had stopped to think for two seconds would have seen the problem, but Roemer had managed to write an entire scholarly treatise without thinking for two seconds. Having settled on stupidity as the criterion of inauthenticity he went on to discard one stupid remark after another as really by Zenodotus or Aristophanes (no, not the) or misquoted by Didymus, with many sarcastic & gleeful asides on the ineptitude of these imbeciles.

When I first worked out that this was what he was saying I couldn't believe he could really say it so I read another 50 pages (at a rate of 20 minutes/page, thus adding another 16.66 hours to the total) and he really was saying it. I stared at the page. I closed my eyes.

Say you grow up in the type of place that is excited to be getting its first motel, moving from town to town as one motel is finished and another begun. You are naturally not enthralled by school and achieve a solid B – average. Presently you take Scholastic Aptitude Tests and astound everyone by a degree of scholastic aptitude which places the B – average in an entirely different light. Your teachers take the result as a personal insult. You apply to various colleges, who ask for references, and teachers who have reduced you to speechless torpor write complaining of apathy. You are

interviewed on the basis of dazzling scholastic aptitude and you are asked about your interests and you have no interests. You have no extracurricular activities because the extracurricular activity was the Donny Osmond Fan Club. Everyone turns down your application on grounds of apathy.

One day you are lying on a bed in one of the motel rooms. Your mother is having a bad day: she is playing Chopin's Revolutionary Etude for the 63rd time on the piano in the adjacent room. Your father is having a good day: a member of the Gideon Society has come to suggest placing Bibles in the rooms, and he has been able to state categorically that he is not having that piece of trash in his motel. Each bedside table, he explains, has a copy of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the top drawer. In fact it's a really good day because that very morning one of the guests stole the *Origin of Species* instead of a towel. You stare apathetically at the TV. They are showing A Yank at Oxford.

Suddenly you have an idea.

Surely *Oxford*, you reason, would not hold non-membership of the Donny Osmond Fan Club against you. Surely *Oxford* would not insist on mindless enthusiasm just to prove you can be enthusiastic about *something*. Surely *Oxford* would not accept hearsay as evidence. Surely *Oxford* wouldn't hold a reference against you without knowing anything about the writer.

Why not apply?

I thought: I could leave Motelland and live among rational beings! I would never be bored again!

I had reckoned without Roemer. I now thought: Maybe it's my German?

But he really was saying it and I really had spent 46.66 hours reading it. I stared at the page. I stared out across the dome. The space was filled with the soft sound of pages turning. I put my head on my hand.

I had spent 46+ hours on this bizarre piece of logic at a time when I had read not a word of Musil, or Rilke, or Zweig. But I did not have a scholarship to read things that were merely good; I had a scholarship to make a contribution to knowledge. I had squandered 47 hours at a time when people were dying of starvation & children sold into slavery; but I did not

have a work permit to do things that were merely worth doing. If I had not needed the work permit I could have dispensed with the scholarship, & if I had gone back to the States I could have dispensed with the work permit, but I did not want to go back to the States.

There is a character in *The Count of Monte Cristo* who digs through solid rock for years and finally gets somewhere: he finds himself in another cell. It was that kind of moment.

I wished I had spent the 47 hours on dialects of the Yemen.

I tried to cheer myself up. I thought: I am in Britain! I can go to a film and catch an ad for Carling Black Label! Because the ads in Britain are the best in the world, and the ads for Carling Black Label were British advertising at its best. I couldn't think of a film I actually wanted to see but the ad would be brilliant. But I suddenly thought that this was exactly the problem, this was the diabolical thing about life: one minute of a Carling Black Label ad to two hours of Ghostbusters XXXV that you didn't even want to see in the first place. So I decided not to go to a film, and if only—

I decided against a film. I thought: Let's go in search of fried chicken.

An American in Britain has sources of solace available nowhere else on earth. One of the marvellous things about the country is the multitudes of fried chicken franchises selling fried chicken from states not known for fried chicken on the other side of the Atlantic. If you're feeling a little depressed you can turn to Tennessee Fried Chicken, if you're in black despair an Iowa Fried Chicken will put things in perspective, if life seems worthless and death out of reach you can see if somewhere on the island an Alaska Fried Chicken is frying chicken according to a recipe passed down by the Inuit from time immemorial.

I cycled out the Cowley Road, past a Maryland Fried Chicken, past a Georgia, and all the time I was trying to think of something I could do without a work permit. I came at last to a Kansas Fried Chicken and dismounted.

I was just locking my bike when I thought suddenly: *Rilke was the secretary of Rodin*.

The things I knew about Rilke were these: that he was a poet; that he went to Paris and got a job as secretary to Rodin; and that he saw some paintings by Cézanne in an exhibition at the Grand Palais and went back day after day to stare for hours, because they were like nothing he'd seen.

I knew nothing about how Rilke got this job, so that I was free to imagine that he simply turned up on the doorstep. Why shouldn't I simply turn up on a doorstep? I could go to London or Paris or Rome and turn up on the doorstep of a painter or sculptor, the type of person who would probably not care about a work permit. I could see things that had just come into the world and stare for hours.

I walked up and down and I tried to think of an artist who might need an assistant.

I walked up and down and I thought that perhaps it would be easier to think of an artist if I were already in London or Paris or Rome.

I did not have a lot of money, so I walked up and down trying to think of a way to get to London or Paris or Rome. At last I went into the Kansas Fried Chicken.

I was just about to order a Kansas Chik'n Bucket when I remembered that I had signed up for dinner in college. My college was famous for its chef, and yet I was tempted to stay where I was, and if only—

I won't think that. I don't mean that, but if only—

What difference does it make? What's done is done.

By coincidence I had signed up to eat in college that night; by coincidence I sat by a former member who was visiting; it was no coincidence that I talked of intellectual monogamy & of work permits since I could think of nothing else, but by coincidence this former member said sympathetically that Balthus had been the secretary of Rilke, by coincidence she was the daughter of a civil servant & so not intimidated by British bureaucracy, & she said that if I could bear the shame of being known to

Why are they fighting?

WHY ARE THEY FIGHTING?

WHY ARE THEY FIGHTING?

Can't you read what it says?
Of COURSE I can read it but WHY
Well they're looking for samurai to defend the village from bandits
I know that
but some of them think it's a waste of time
I know THAT
because the samurai they've asked have been insulted by the offer of three meals a day
I KNOW that
and now they're saying I told you so
I KNOW THAT BUT WHY ARE THEY FIGHTING
I think this may be too hard for you.
NO
Maybe we should wait till you're older
NO
Just till you're 6
NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!
OKOKOKOKOK. OK. OK.

I think he is probably too young but what can I do? Today I read these terrible words in the paper:

> In the absence of a benevolent male, the single mother faces an uphill battle in raising her son. It is essential that she provide the boy with male role models—neighbours, or uncles, or friends of the family, to share their interests and hobbies.

This is all very well but Ludo is an uncleless boy, and I don't happen to know any well-meaning stamp collectors (if I did I would do my best to avoid them). It's worrying. I once read that Argentine soldiers tied up dissidents and took them up in planes over the sea and threw them out. I thought: well, if L needs a role model let him watch Seven Samurai & he will have 8.

The farmers see a crowd of people. A samurai has gone to the river's edge to be shaved by a monk.

A man with a moustache and a sword pushes his way through the crowd and squats scratching his chin. (It's Toshiro Mifune.)

A handsome, aristocratic young man asks someone what's happening. A thief is hiding in a barn. He is holding a baby hostage. The samurai has asked for monk's robes and two rice cakes.

The samurai puts on his disguise. He feels Mifune watching and turns. His eyes are black in a white face on a black screen. Mifune stares blankly back. The samurai's eyes are black in a white face. Mifune scratches himself. The samurai turns away. He turns back and looks at Mifune; his eyes are black his face is white. He turns away and goes to the barn.

Mifune sits on a stump close behind him to watch.

The samurai tells the thief he has brought food, tosses the rice cakes through the door, and follows.

The thief runs from the barn and falls down dead.

The samurai drops the thief's sword in the dirt.

The parents of the child rush forward to take it.

Mifune runs forward brandishing his sword. He jumps up and down on the body.

The samurai walks off without a backward look.

type (I had admitted to 100wpm) I could have a work permit & a job.

I was about to say earlier that if I had not read Roemer on the 30th of April 1985 the world would be short a genius; I said that the world without the Infant Terrible would be like the world without Newton & Mozart & Einstein! I have no idea if this is true; I have no way of knowing if this is true. Not every genius is a prodigy & not every prodigy is a genius & at 5 it is too soon to tell. Sidis knew 12 languages at 8, lectured on solid geometry at Harvard at 12, and ended unknown to all but anxious parents of early over-achievers. Cézanne taught himself to paint in his twenties. But Bernini was a prodigy and a genius, and so was Mozart. It's not impossible. It's possible.

It's possible, but is it likely? If L is a Mozart or a Newton people 10 centuries from now will be interested in the fact that he so nearly

Why did he cut off his hair? Why did he change his clothes?

WHY DID HE CUT OFF HIS HAIR? WHY DID HE CHANGE HIS CLOTHES?

WHY DID HE

He had to disguise himself as a priest so the thief wouldn't be suspicious and kill the child.

Well why couldn't the priest go?

I think Buddhist priests don't believe in violence. Besides, the priest might not have been able to disarm the thief. Anyway the thing that matters is that he does it for nothing, and he does it to rescue a child, because we discover later that his greatest regret—

I would like to tell him to let the film speak for itself. I am about to say this in the confidence that he cannot go wrong when I remember Mr. Richie's comments on the final rice-planting scene. Mr. Richie is the author of *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, and as I rely on this book for everything I know about the many films of Kurosawa which are not available on video I wish he had not said that the end showed the ingratitude of the farmers and a rice-planting scene as an element of hope. If the film does not speak for itself I will have to say something about the film which I would very much rather

I say to L that I read somewhere that in the Tokugawa period it was punishable by death for a non-samurai to carry a sword. I say that Mr. Richie says that shaving the head would normally be a mark of humiliation for a samurai. I say that the name of the actor with the moustache is Mifune Toshiro because I don't want him to pick up my bad habit of putting the names in the Western order out of laziness and I write it down on a piece of paper for him so he will know it next time. I say that the name of the actor who plays the samurai is Shimura Takashi and I write down after a little thought the characters for Shimura and after a lot of thought the character for Takashi. I say that I have seen Kurosawa's name spelled two ways, the characters for Kuro (black) and Akira (don't know) are always the same, but I have seen two different characters used for Sawa. I write down both versions & I say that it seems more polite to use the form preferred by its

bearer. He says which one is Kurosawa and I say he does not appear, he is the director and he says what's a director and I say that it will be easier to explain when he has seen the film. It occurs to me that these pieces of information are flimsy defences against whatever it is that makes a man when told to toss a person from a plane do as told, which is too bad as L instantly wants to know more. He asks me to write down the names of all the other actors so he can look at them later. I say I will try to find them in the autobiography.

never existed; Roemer will be as momentous in his way as the plague that sent Newton home from Cambridge. But why shouldn't he end badly? The business of getting a baby from womb to air is pretty well understood. Out it comes, a dribbling squall. Presently its talents come into the open; they are hunted down, and bludgeoned into insensibility. But Mozart was once a prodigious, prestidigious little monkey.

My father used to say with a mocking smile when things went wrong, which they for the most part did: Of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these, it might have been. If L comes to good not by some miracle but by doing the right thing rather than the wrong others may profit from his escape; if he comes to bad (as is not unlikely) his example may spare them.

The farmers look at each other. This is the man they need. They follow him out of town.

So does Mifune.

So does the aristocratic young man. He runs up to the samurai in the road and falls to his knees.

L (reading subtitles): My name is Katsushiro Okamoto. Let me follow you

L: I am Kambei Shimada. I am only a ronin. What's a ronin?

I: A masterless samurai.

L: I am not a samurai and I have no followers

L: Please take me

L: Stand up, or else we can't talk properly
L: You are embarrassing me; I am not very skilful
Listen, I can't teach you anything special
I've merely had a lot of fighting experience
Go away and forget about following me
It's for your own good
L: I'm determined to follow you, whatever you say
L: I forbid you
I can't afford to have any followers
Mifune runs up and stares at the samurai. Kambei: Onushi—samurai ka? Mifune (drawing himself up) : [incomprehensible shout]
L: Are you a samurai?
L: Of course!
Kambei and Katsushiro walk away. A farmer runs forward and falls to his knees.

I tell L that in the autobiography Kurosawa has nothing but praise for the marvellous Mifune except possibly that he had a rather harsh way of talking which the microphones had trouble picking up. I say that it's very charming the way the translators have translated the Japanese into Penguin.

L: What's Penguin?

I: It's what English translators translate into. Merely had a lot of fighting experience! Determined to follow you! As it happens most English speakers can understand Penguin even if they wouldn't use it in daily life, but still.

L: Isn't that what they say?

I: They *may* be speaking Penguin Japanese, we can only surmise. Kambei says *Tada kassen ni wa zuibun deta ga, tada*, just, *kassen* is battle or combat according to Halpern (but I wonder whether that isn't just Penguin infiltrating the dictionary), *ni* in, *wa* topic particle, *zuibun* a lot, *deta* happened, *ga* another particle which we won't go into now but which seems pretty common, it's hard to believe *it* is giving the flavour of Penguin to the

L: When are you going to teach me Japanese?

I: I don't know enough to teach you.

L: You could teach me what you know.

I: [NO NO NO NO] Well

L: Please

I: Well

L: Please

Voice of Sweet Reason: You've started so many other things I think you should work on them more before you start something new.

L: How much more?

I: Well

L: How much more?

The last thing I want is to be teaching a five-year-old a language I have not yet succeeded in teaching myself.

I: I'll think about it.

I would like to strike a style to amaze. I think I am not likely to discover the brush of Cézanne; if I am to leave no other record I would like it to be a marvel. But I must write to be understood; how can formal perfection be saved? I see in my mind a page, I think of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*: across the top one Latin line, the rest English (or possibly German), identification of persons obscure after 2,000 years. Just so will this look if I explain every reference for 45th-century readers, readers who may, for all I know, know the name of a single 21st-century genius (the one now five years old). What I mean is that I see in my mind a page, across the top a line with the words Carling Black Label, the rest a solid mass of small type describing Carling Black Label the beer, Carling Black Label ads the glory of British advertising, Levi's the jeans, stonewashed Levi's ad parodied in classic ad for Carling Black Label, lyrics of I Heard It Through the Grapevine classic song sung by Marvin Gaye in classic jeans and classic beer ad, not to mention terrible deprivation of American audiences of the time able to export the jeans and import the beer but not to sample the glories of British advertising to which these gave rise. What I mean is that I have read books written 2,000 or even 2,500 years ago or 20 years ago and in 2,500 years they will need everything even Mozart explained and when once you start explaining there is no end

to it.

HOW MUCH MORE?
HOW *MUCH* MORE?

HOW, MUCH, MORE?

I: Well if you read the *Odyssey* and Books 1–8 of the *Metamorphoses* and the whole *Kalilah wa Dimnah* and 30 of the *Thousand and One Nights* and I Samuel *and* the Book of Jonah *and* learn the cantillation and if you do 10 chapters in *Algebra Made Easy* then I will teach you as much as I can.

L: Then that's what I'll do.

I: All right.

L: I will.

I: Fine.

L: You'll see.

I: I know.

L: Will you teach me the alphabet while I'm working on the rest?

I: It doesn't have an alphabet. It has two sets of syllabaries of 46 symbols apiece, 1,945 characters of Chinese derivation in common use since the Second World War and up to 50,000 characters used before then. I know the syllabaries and 262 characters which I keep forgetting which is precisely why I am not really qualified to teach it to you.

L: Then why don't you get a Japanese to teach me?

This is a wonderful idea. I could get a benevolent Japanese male to act as an uncle substitute for L! A benevolent Mifune lookalike to come and talk about stamp collecting or football or his car in a language which would conceal the diabolical tedium of the subject. But he would probably want some money.

I: I don't think we can afford it.

I once read a book about an Australian girl who was given an English bulldog; a big truck was sent into town to collect the (as they thought) large animal, and brought back a baby bulldog that could be held in the palm of a

hand. At the time I thought I would like a tiny bulldog of my own. Little did I know. L has read Ali Baba and Moses in the Bullrushes and Cicero's *De Amicitia* and the *Iliad* which I started him on by accident, & he can play Straight No Chaser which he learned by listening to the tape & trying to copy it about 500 times—it is wonderful that he was able to do it and yet if you are trying to type 62 years of *Crewelwork Digest* onto computer in the same room it can sometimes be hard to feel a proper

For who was Mozart? Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) was an Austrian composer of genius, taught music by his father Leopold from the age of five, and displayed in the courts of Europe playing the harpsichord blindfold and performing other tricks. He composed string quartets, symphonies, piano sonatas, a concerto for the glass organ and several operas including Don Giovanni and The Magic Flute. His sister Nannerl received identical training and was not a musical genius. I have heard it argued, and by a clever man too, that this proves that women are not capable of musical genius. How is it possible to argue this, you say, AND to know that a brother and sister may have no genes in common, without being committed to the unlikely theory that any man could be a Mozart with similar training? You say it, and I thought it; but the fact is that a clever man so seldom needs to think

What's a syllabary?
A syllabary is a set of phonetic symbols each representing a syllable

he gets out of the habit.

What's a syllable?
You know what a syllable is
No I don't

A syllable is a phonetic element of a word containing a vowel, take the word 'containing' you could break it down to 'con-tain-ing' and have a symbol for each part. In Chinese each word is just one syllable long, a monosyllable. What would polysyllabic be?

With many syllables?

Exactement.

And oligosyllabic would be with few syllables

It would be, but it's not used much, people seem to work in terms of an opposition between the one and the many

Duosyllabic

It would be better to say word of two syllables on grounds of euphony. In general if you are going to make up a word you should use the adverbial form of the number, which would give disyllabic except people often seem to use bi after mono, monogamy bigamy monoplane biplane. Usually Latin numbers go with words of Latin derivation, so unilateral bilateral multilateral bicameral multinational, and Greek numbers with words of Greek derivation, tetrahedron, tetralogy, pentagon

Trisyllabic

Yes

Tetrasyllabic

Yes

Pentasyllabic hexasyllabic heptasyllabic oktasyllabic enasyllabic dekasyllabic hendekasyllabic dodekasyllabic

Exactly

Treiskaidekasyllabic tessareskaidekasyllabic pentekaidekasyllabic hekkaidekasyllabic heptakaidekasyllabic

And who was Bernini? Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) was 'the greatest genius of the Italian Baroque', who moved to Rome at the age of seven and was taught by his father

EIKOSASYLLABIC

Pietro, a sculptor. Rudolf Wittkower (German art historian, refugee from the Nazis [where to begin?], author of *Art & Architecture in Italy 1600–1750*) compares him to Michelangelo ([1475–1564]),

enneakaieikosasyllabic

TRIAKONTASYLLABIC

painter, poet, sculptor of genius ...) in his capacity for superhuman

oktokaitriakontasyllabic enneakaitriakontasyllabic
TESSARAKONTASYLLABIC

concentration. 'But unlike the terrible and lonely giant of the sixteenth century, he was a man of infinite charm, a brilliant and witty talker, fond of conviviality, aristocratic in demeanour, a good husband and father, a first-rate

enneakaitessarakontasyllabic PENTEKONTASYLLABIC
heiskaipentekontasyllabic

organiser, endowed with an unparalleled talent for creating rapidly and with ease.'

And Cézanne? Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) was a French painter of genius, associated with the Impressionist

treiskaihexekontasyllabic

school of painting. He was inarticulate: people called him the Bear. He worked very slowly and with

oktokaihexekontasyllabic enneakaihexekontasyllabic
HEBDOMEKONTASYLLABIC

difficulty. He is most famous for his landscapes and still lifes. His method was to apply blocks of paint to the canvas, often with a palette knife rather than a brush. He worked so

heptakaihebdomekontasyllabic

slowly that even fruit could not

OGDOEKONTASYLLABIC

stand still enough: it rotted

What's the longest word in the world?

I don't know. I don't know all the words in the world.

What's the longest word you know?

I don't know.

How can you not know?

I think it's the name of a polymer. I can't remember how it goes.

duokaiogdoekontasyllabic

Wait a minute. Here's a good one. di(2-ethylhexyl)hexa-hydrophthalate.

Is that the polymer?

No.

What does it mean?

I once knew.

My dad would know.

The hell he would (think I)—I would like to say this but I don't KNOW that he doesn't, there is only an (in my opinion) overwhelming likelihood, & I think I should not blacken his name to L without good hard evidence.

He MAY know. It didn't come up in the conversation.

What did you talk about?

I talked about the Rosetta Stone. He talked about his car and about a writer he admired.

What kind of car does he have?

He didn't say. Diethyl-dimethyl methane. Diethyl-diethyl malonate. Diethyl-methyl-ethyl malonate.

treiskaiogdoekontasyllabic tessareskaiogdoekontasyllabic pentekaiogdoekontasyllabic

before he was done. He used

oktokaiogdoekontasyllabic enneakaiogdoekontasyllabic

ENENEKONTASYLLABIC

wax fruit instead.

And who was Rilke and who was Zweig and who was Musil? Who was Newton and who was Einstein? Rilke

Why don't you teach me the syllabaries?
WHY DON'T YOU TEACH ME THE SYLLABARIES?
WHY DON'T YOU TEACH ME THE SYLLABARIES?
Well
Are they hard?
Not very
Please
Well
Please
I told you the deal
Heiskaienenekontasyllabic duokaienenekontasyllabic

Glenn Gould (eccentric, brilliant mid-20th-century Canadian pianist and specialist in the works of J. S. Bach [18th-century German

HEPTAKAIENENEKONTASYLLABIC

composer of genius]) said of The Well-Tempered Clavier [forget it], that the preludes

OKTOKAIENENEKONTASYLLABIC

were merely prefatory

ENNEAKAIENENEKONTASYLLABIC

and of no

HEKATONTASYLLABIC

real musical interest. The

You could teach me ONE syllabary
I told you the deal
Is there a language with only one syllabary?
I think Tamil makes do with one
So Tamil would be a monosyllabaric language
Yes
And Japanese is a disyllabaric language but most people would call it bisyllabaric
Yes
trisyllabaric tetrasyllabaric pentasyllabaric hexasyllabaric

reader

heptasyllabaric

may

oktasyllabaric

take comfort

enasyllabaric

in a plain

dekasyllabaric hendekasyllabaric dodekasyllabaric

preface.

hekkaidekasyllabaric

I will hope to do no worse by

heptakaidekasyllabaric
OKTOKAIDEKASYLLABARIC

ENNEAKAIDEKASYLLABARIC

EIKOSASYLLABARIC

heiskai

You're missing a masterpiece of modern cinema. Finish the *Odyssey* and I'll teach you the hiragana, yes?

Done.

Emma offered me a work permit & a job.

I said: Done.

Odyssey 1.

Odyssey 2.

Odyssey 3.

Odyssey 4.

I never meant this to happen. (L is reading *Odyssey* 5. He has read four books in four days. I would carry on from where I left off but I have misplaced my notes.) What I meant was to follow the example of Mr. Ma (father of the famous cellist), who I read somewhere started teaching Yo Yo when he was 2.

Coupez la difficulté en quatre was his motto, which meant that he would reduce a piece of music to a number of very small short tasks; the child was to master one task a day. He used the same procedure with Chinese characters, the child learning a character a day—by my reckoning that makes two simple tasks but you get the picture. I thought that this would be an enormous help to L for very little trouble to myself, & when he was 2 I started him on flashcards.

I think that the first simple task was supposed to be cat. No sooner had he mastered this simple task than he wanted to go on, he wanted every single word in his vocabulary on a card, he sobbed PURPLE PURPLE PURPLE when I tried to stop before writing it down. The next day he started his first book, *Hop on Pop* by Dr. Seuss, no sooner had he started than he started to cry because he did not know Hop and Pop. I saw in a flash that the time required to teach a two-year-old workaholic by the look-and-say method would leave perhaps 6 minutes a day for typing, & so (doubting my ability to make ends meet on 55p a day) I hastily went over a few principles of the phonics system. He learned to say huh when he saw an h and puh when he saw a p and by the end of the week he could read as follows: Hop. On. Pop. The. Cat. in. the. Hat.

I thought: It worked! It worked!

He would sit on the floor and when he found something interesting he would bring it over to show me.

Thunder of tiny feet. He had unearthed a treasure. Yes? I would say

And he would produce from the page—O Joy!—a thing of glory

The

Wonderful!

And here was another find! What could it be? Could it—No—Yes—*Yes*—It was a

Cat

And he would pluck from the page one marvel after another, until at last he could nonchalantly draw now a rabbit, now a dove, now a string of coloured scarves from an ordinary empty black top hat.

Wonderful marvellous wonderful marvellous cool

I was not getting as much work done as I had hoped.

One day it occurred to him that there were quite a lot of other books on the shelves.

He selected a book with pictures, and he came to my side, perturbed.

The face on the gutta percha inkstand has a tale to tell

I explained gutta percha, inkstand and tale

it is believed to be that of Neptune, moulded to commemorate the successful use of the material to insulate the world's first submarine telegraph cable from England to France in 1850.

& I said NO.

I said You know a lot of these words don't you, and he said Yes, and I said Why don't you practise reading the words you know and you can pick FIVE WORDS that you don't know and I will explain them.

I don't know how much of this deal he understood. He asked for Neptune, moulded, commemorate, successful, material, insulate and

submarine. I explained them in a manner which I leave to the imagination. He read a few words that he knew and put the book on the floor. Then he went back for another book. What a delightful surprise! In, And, To and our old friend The in *Truth and Other Enigmas*! Sadly, however, no sign of gutta percha or Neptune.

He put the book on the floor and went back to the shelf.

20 books later I thought: This is not going to work.

I said: Put the book back on the shelf

& he took it down with a cry of glee

so I put it back and I put him in his playpen and he started to sob.

I said: Look, why don't you look at all the nice pictures in *Classic Plastics*, and whenever you know a word you can read the word, look at this lovely yellow radio

and he sobbed NOOOOOOOOO

I said: Well look, here's *Truth and Other Enigmas*, that's got lots and lots and lots of words, let's see if you know a word on this page

& he sobbed NOOOOOOOOOO and tore the page from the book and hurled the book away.

I thought: Let's think of some other simple task. A simple task that can be mastered on a daily basis that will not lead to the transfer of hundreds of books to the floor.

So I took him to Grant & Cutler and I bought a little French picture book and *Yaourtu la Tortue* and *L'Histoire de Babar* (as well as a copy of Rilke's *Letters on Cézanne* which they happened to have in stock). I taught him a few simple words on a daily basis for a few days and he left the English books alone.

I thought: It worked! It worked!

One day he found some French books on a shelf. I explained five words in *Zadig*. Soon 20 French books had followed it to the floor. Then he went back to the English books.

I thought: Let's think of another simple task.

I thought arithmetic could be the simple task. So I taught him to count

I said: Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

—& I wrote out a little table for him:

Α	Β	Γ	Δ	Ε	Ζ	Η	Θ	Ι	Κ	Λ	Μ
A	B	G	D	E	Z	Ē	TH	I	K	L	M

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ
a	b	g	d	e	z	ē	th	i	k	l	m

Ν	Ξ	Ο	Π	Ρ	Σ	Τ	Υ	Φ	Χ	Ψ	Ω
N	X	O	P	R	S	T	U	PH	KH	PS	Ō

ν	ξ	ο	π	ρ	σ, ς	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω
n	x	o	p	r	s	t	u	ph	kh	ps	ō

& I said: There's the alphabet.

He looked at the table and he looked at the page.

I said: It's perfectly simple. As you can see a lot of the letters are the same as the ones you already know.

He looked at the table and he looked at the page and he looked at the table.

The Alien said: He is only four

Mr. Ma said: Coupez la difficulté en quatre

I said patiently:

I said patiently a lot of things which it would try my patience even more to repeat. I hope I am as ready as the next person to suffer for the good of others, and if I knew for a fact that even 10 people this year, next year or a thousand years from now would like to know how one teaches a 4-year-old Greek I hope I would have the decency to explain it. As I don't know this I think I will set this aside for the moment. L seems to be transferring *Odyssey* 5 word by word to pink file cards.

Odyssey 6.

Odyssey 7.

Emma was as good as her word and I was as good as my word.

In the summer of 1985 I began working as a secretary in a small publishing house in London which specialised in dictionaries and non-academic works of scholarship. It had an English dictionary that had first come out in 1812 and been through nine or ten editions and sold well, and a range of technical dictionaries for native speakers of various other languages that sold moderately well, and a superb dictionary of literary Bengali which was full of illustrative material and had no rival and hardly sold at all. It had a two-volume history of sugar, and a three-volume survey of London doorknockers (supplement in preparation), and various other books which gradually built up a following by word of mouth. I did not want to be a secretary & I did not particularly want to get into publishing, but I did not want to go back to the States.

Emma was really the next worst thing to the States. She loved America in the way that the Victorians loved Scotland, French Impressionists Japan. She loved an old Esso station on a state highway in a pool of light with a round red Coca-Cola sign swinging in the wind, and a man on a horse thinking vernacular thoughts among scenes of spectacular natural beauty, and a man in a fast car on a freeway in LA. She loved all the books I'd been made to read at school, and she loved the books we didn't read in school because they might be offensive to born-again Baptists. I did not know what to say.

In my mind I saw a timid little mezzotint in which a lot of cross-hatching and a little hand tinting depicted some place where Europeans first going had been drunk on colour & writing a book had insisted on the Grand

Canyon or Table Mountain or the South Seas being shown in a colour engraving, so that what was brilliant cobalt was represented by blue so pale it was almost white, vermilion crimson and scarlet by pink so pale almost white and there would be also a green so pale perhaps yellow so pale perhaps pale pale mauve, so that the reader might taste in a glass of water a real drop of whisky. I thought of Emma's favourites with a scornful laugh, and yet this was stupid, you could just as well think of some other image that would not be contemptible—the black-and-white film does not show the world we see around us in its colours but it is not contemptible. The fact is that though things were better than when I had been reading things people had thrown their lives away on seventy years before at any moment a passion would fling itself on the first idea standing by and gallop off ventre à terre—how quietly and calmly some people argue.

It made me nervous to have these rages and sardonic laughs just waiting to gallop off ventre à terre, it was easier not to say anything or to say something quiet and banal. And yet if someone is very clever and charming you would rather not say something banal, you resolve instead to say something while remaining perfectly calm & in control—

I said that it seemed very quaint that in England books were in English & in France they were in French and that in 2,000 years this would seem as quaint as Munchkinland & the Emerald City, in the meantime it was strange that people from all over the world would go to one place to breed a nation of English writers & another to breed writers of Spanish, it was depressing in a literature to see all the languages fading into English which in America was the language of forgetfulness. I argued that this was false to what was there in a way that a European language could not be false to a European country, just as it was one thing to film Kansas in black & white but for the Land of Oz you had to have Technicolor, & what's more (I seemed to be covering ground more impetuously than I had planned but it was too late to stop) it was preposterous that people who were by and large the most interesting the most heroic the most villainous the newest immigrants could appear in the literature of the country only as character actors

speaking bad English or italics & by & large both they & their descendants' ignorance of their language & customs could not be represented at all in the new language, which had forgotten that there was anything to forget.

Emma said: You mean you think they should not be just in English.

Exactly, I said. Once you think of it you wonder why you never thought of it before.

Well, said Emma, they do say desktop publishing is the way of the future —

Would you like me to type a 100-word letter in a minute? I said, for there was work to be done. A 50-word letter in 30 seconds? A 5-word letter in 3?

I hope you're not too bored, said Emma.

I said: Bored!

I know it's not very interesting, said Emma.

I would have liked to say But it's absolutely *enthralling*. I said sensibly: The main thing is it's giving me a chance to decide what I want to do.

This was exactly the kind of banal, boring remark I would rather not have made in the presence of someone clever and charming, but it seemed to me that Emma looked rather relieved. I said: It's just what I was looking for. It's absolutely fine.

The job was absolutely fine, Emma was clever and charming and I was in London. I tried to follow the example of Rilke but it was not so easy. It was not just a question of being overwhelmed by a body of work: Rilke was overwhelmed by Cézanne, but Cézanne could not have used a secretary, nor paid one. I did not like the idea of working for Rodin in order to stare overwhelmed at Cézanne; it seems as though if you turn up on someone's doorstep you should at least be overwhelmed by his work.

Sometimes I rode the Circle Line reading a book on organic chemistry and sometimes I read *Leave It to Psmith* for the 20th or 21st time and sometimes I watched Jeremy Brett's marvellous grotesque Sherlock Holmes or of course Seven Samurai. I sometimes went out for Tennessee Fried Chicken.

Day followed day. A year went by.

laden hands sparkled over the keys, the professional sincerity which found expressiveness for the cynical & the sentimental, for the pornographic, even for alienation & affectlessness. And yet he was not really exactly like the pianist, because though he did genuinely have the emotional facility of the musician he had only the air of technical facility, there being to even a buttery arpeggio not only the matter of running hands up and down the keys but

L wants to know what βίηφιν means. I say he knows perfectly well what it means & he says he doesn't.

At first (because I was explaining that βίηφιν was the instrumental form of βίη, meaning by force or violence) I thought that the writer was like a person who typing puts a hand down one key to the right or left of where it should be, so that an intelligible sentence nrvomrd duffrnly uninyrllihlnlr ot nrstly do, snf yhr gsdyrt you yypr yhr eotdr iy hryd (ψηλαφόων means, can I see the line? it means feeling or groping about), and in my mind I saw the hands of Liberace moving rapidly & confidently up and down the keyboard striking keys now black now white. Now I think (as far as a person can be said to think who is taking the place of a talking dictionary) that even this is not quite right, because though Liberace did strew his work with mistakes they were not the kind (πετάσσας means spreading, it is the aorist participle of πετάννυμι) that you could overlook in that way or rather (you know perfectly well what ὕφαινον means No I don't It means weave and what form is it here 1st person singular imperfect OK) it is not that he overlooked them (ἄρσενες means males) but that he looked straight at them with complacency (just a minute). Breathless with adoration would Liberace litter his work with gaping arguments and images knocked awry, stand back, fold arms, Ed Wood abeam at toppling tombstones and rumpled grass (just a *minute*). Did he notice or not care? He liked I expect the idea of effortless excellence, & being unable to combine the two had settled for the one he could be sure of (δασύμαλλοι: thick-fleeced; ἰοδνεφίς: dark; λίγοισι: withies; withy: a piece of wicker-work; πέλωρ: You

know what πέλ ω ρ means No I don't Yes you do Don't Do Don't Do Don't Do Don't Don't Don't Don't It means monster That's what I *thought* it meant —No wonder I am sticking pins in the father of this child). Here was a man who'd learned to write before he could think, a man who threw out logical fallacies like tacks behind a getaway car, and he always always always got away.

Od. 10.

Met. 1.

I Sam. I? [Have not read in years.]

I Sam. II-V? [Hell.]

It is strange to think that Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre* was first published in 1911, a year before Roemer brought out *Aristarchs Athetesen in der Homerkritik*. Schoenberg, who had a wife and two children, was scraping a living as a teacher of music & portrait painter. I think Roemer held a position at the University of Leipzig. Roemer's colleagues might have pointed out the fallacy; I might have spoken fluent German & lost half an hour on it; I might have lost 50 hours a week later—and Ludoviticus would not now be setting Mr. Ma at defiance by mastering 500 simple tasks on a daily basis. The atoms which now direct the application of a pink Schwan Stabilo highlighter to *Odyssey* 10 would be going about some other business, as would I, & the world, for all I know, would be short an Einstein. And yet tactful colleagues, bad German and terrible timing might have conspired to catapult me from an academic career without effect upon Schwan Stabilo & *Odyssey* 10: Schoenberg, distracted by financial difficulties, might have written a stupid book. He might have written a clever book; I might have gone to buy a dress on the day of the party.

On the day of the party I walked down to Covent Garden at lunchtime to buy a dress, and on my way to Boules I thought I would just stop off for a moment at Books etc. I happened to go into the music section, and I happened to pick up Schoenberg's *Theory of Harmony*.

My father used to say, when things went wrong, that man is the cat's paw of fate. I think this is the kind of thing he had in mind.

No sooner had I taken the book from the shelf than I had to buy it; no sooner bought than began to read.

Schoenberg was putting forward arguments for the development of

music using a much more liberal notion of consonance, and then possibly eventually of a music using a much wider range of notes (so that you could have, say, an extra four notes between C and C sharp). He said:

> It is clear that, just as the overtones led to the 12-part division of the simplest consonance, the octave, so they will eventually bring about the further differentiation of this interval. To future generations music like ours will seem incomplete, since it has not yet fully exploited everything latent in sound, just as a sort of music that did not yet differentiate within the octave would seem incomplete to us. Or, to cite an analogy—which one has only to think through completely to see how very relevant it is: The sound of our music will at that time seem to have no depth, no perspective, just as Japanese painting, for example, affects us as primitive compared with our own, because without perspective it lacks depth. That [change] will come, if not in the manner that some believe, and if not as soon. It will not come through reasoning (aus Gründen) but from elemental sources (Ursachen); it will not come from without, but from within. It will not come through imitation of some prototype, and not as technical accomplishment; for it is far more a matter of mind and spirit (Geist) than of material, and the Geist must be ready.

I thought this was one of the most brilliant things I had ever heard in my life. The comment on Japanese art was obviously wrong—I no sooner read it than I saw in my mind an image of Lord Leighton's Greek Girls Playing at Ball, with its irreproachable, its even masterly use of perspective in the handling of the girls, the antique landscape, the airborne drapery, no sooner did I see this than I started to laugh, so shallow and superficial and even artless did it seem in comparison with (say) a print by Utamaro. But the basic argument was absolutely brilliant.

Before reading this brilliant book I had thought that books should be more like the film The Godfather, in which at one stage Al Pacino goes to Sicily and the Italian is all in Italian. Now I thought that this was a rather simpleminded way of looking at the question.

If you say that in a book the Italians should speak Italian because in the actual world they speak Italian and the Chinese should speak Chinese because Chinese speak Chinese it is a rather naive way of thinking of a work

rather distracted but still he started telling me about the opera Moses and Aaron.

He said Of course you know what it's about

& I said Well presumably

& he said No musically, musically it's about, & he paused, & he said in this opera Moses spoke directly to God and he did not sing his part was in Sprechgesang it was speech, harsh speech over music and the Children of Israel could not understand; he had to communicate through Aaron, who was an operatic tenor, it was a beautiful lyric role but of course it's Aaron who proposes the Golden Calf, he doesn't himself understand—

I said what a marvellous idea for an opera the plots were usually so farfetched and contrived

& he said he rather liked that but yes it was a marvellous idea, and he began to tell me in a low-key English way a terrible story about the opera which he described as one of the great lost works of the 20th century. Schoenberg had composed most of the first two acts between 1930 and 1932; then the Nazis had come into power and he had had to leave in 1933 and it had been rather disruptive. He went to America and kept applying for grants to work on it but the foundations did not care for the atonal music. So he had to support his family by teaching, and he went back to composing tonal pieces in support of his grant applications so that his time when he was not teaching was taken up with the tonal compositions. Eighteen years later he had still not composed the music for Act Three of Moses and Aaron. As death drew near he said that perhaps the words could be spoken.

He said: Of course he could be quite a difficult character

& he suddenly said—Will you excuse me? I really must catch Peter before he goes.

He walked off and it was only after he had gone that I realised I had not asked the crucial question, which is Do we ever hear God?

I hesitated and then hesitantly followed but he was already saying Peter!

& Peter said Giles! Good to see you! How are you keeping?

& Giles said Exciting times.

So it was not a good time to intrude. I mingled casually with a nearby group.

Peter said something and Giles said something and Peter said something and Giles said Good Lord No not at all in fact if anything and they talked for quite a long time. They talked for half an hour or so and suddenly they paused, and Peter said Well this is hardly and Giles said Quite, and they paused again and without another word left the room.

I had meant to leave after 10 minutes; it was high time to leave. But now there was more noise by the door and Liberace appeared smiling and kissing women on the cheek and apologising to people for being so late. Several people in my group seemed to know him and tried to catch his eye, and I hastily murmured something about a drink and slipped away. I was nervous of heading for the door, because I was afraid someone might introduce me to Liberace as a special favour, but it seemed safe enough to stand by the buffet. Phrases from Schoenberg kept coming back. At this time I had never heard any of his music but the book on harmony seemed a real work of genius.

I stood by the buffet eating cheese sticks, looking up from time to time at the door—but though Liberace moved gradually into the room he was still between me and the door. So I stood thinking about this brilliant book, I thought, I must buy a piano, & after a while who should come up but Liberace.

He said Are you as bored and frustrated as you look?

It was not easy to think of a reply which would not be rude or flirtatious or both.

I said I never answer trick questions.

He said It's not a trick question. You look completely fed up.

I realised that, faced with coming up with a reply, I had thought of the question and not the questioner. Some people would see that until you have determined how bored and frustrated you look you have no way of knowing whether your sentiments match your appearance—but Liberace had proved himself so innocent of logic in all his written work—was it likely that he

would marshal greater powers of reasoning in casual conversation at a party? No.

I said I was thinking about leaving.

Liberace said So you *were* fed up. I don't blame you. These things are horrible aren't they?

I said I had never been to one before.

He said I thought I hadn't seen you before. Are you with Pearce?

I said Yes I am.

I had a brilliant idea. I said I work for Emma Russell. Everyone in the office was so excited when they heard you'd be here. You must let me introduce you.

He said Would you mind if I didn't?

And he smiled and said I was just about to leave when I saw you. You know misery loves company.

I knew nothing of the kind but I said So they say.

And I said If we leave we won't have any misery to share.

He said Where do you live? Maybe I can give you a lift.

I told him where I lived and he said it was not far out of his way.

I realised too late that I should have said I did not need a lift. I said it now and he said No I insist.

I said That's OK and he said Don't believe everything you hear.

We walked along Park Lane and then along various streets of Mayfair, while Liberace said this and that, in a way that seemed intentionally flirtatious and unintentionally rude.

I realised suddenly that if the Chinese characters were the same as the Japanese I knew the characters for White Rain Black Tree: 白雨黒木! I put these provisionally into the mind of Yu and laughed out loud and Liberace said What's funny. I said Nothing and he said No tell me.

At last in despair I said You know the Rosetta Stone.

What? said Liberace.

I said The Rosetta Stone. I think we need more.

He said One's not enough?

I said What I mean is, though I believe the Stone was originally a rather pompous thing to erect, it was a gift to posterity. Being written in hieroglyphics, demotic and Greek, it only required that one language survive for all to be accessible. Probably one day English will be a much-studied dead language; we should use this fact to preserve other languages to posterity. You could have Homer with translation and marginal notes on vocabulary and grammar, so that if that single book happened to be dug up in 2,000 years or so the people of the day would be able to read Homer, or better yet, we could disseminate the text as widely as possible to give it the best possible chance of survival.

What we should do, I said, is have legislation so that every book published was obliged to have, say, a page of Sophocles or Homer in the original with appropriate marginalia bound into the binding, so that even if you bought an airport novel if your plane crashed you would have something to reread on the desert island. The great thing is that people who were put off Greek at school would then have another chance, I think they're put off by the alphabet but if you've learned one at the age of six how hard can it be? It's not a particularly difficult language.

Liberace said When you get the bit between your teeth you really get carried away don't you? One minute you're so quiet I can hardly get a word out of you, then all of a sudden there's no stopping you. It's rather engaging.

I did not know what to say and he said after a pause What's funny about that?

Nothing, I said and he said Oh, I see.

I asked after a pause where his car was. He said that it should be here. He said that it must have been towed, and he swore The bastards! The bastards! and then he said abruptly that it would just have to be the Tube.

I walked with him to the Tube, and when we got to his stop he said I must come back to his place to take his mind off his car. He said I could not imagine the horror of going to a party such as the one we had left and then discovering that it had cost you fifty pounds or so plus the sheer horror of going to West Croydon or wherever it was they kept the cars to get it back. I

said something sympathetic. I had left the train to continue the conversation and now I found myself leaving the Tube station and walking through the streets with Liberace to his place.

We walked up the steps and upstairs inside and Liberace started up a little conversational medley on the subject of cars and towing and wheel clamps. He improvised on the subject of the depot for the towed-away cars. He improvised on the officials who obstructed attempts to reclaim a car.

His way of talking was a little like his writing: it was quick and nervous and anxious to seem anxious to please, and every so often he would say Oh God I'm talking too much I'm boring you you'll walk out on me and leave me alone to brood on my you know I don't personally consider my car I mean if you could see it you'd see I couldn't possibly consider it a phallic but the meaning's out there isn't it there's something potentially horribly symbolic isn't there about having it towed away just when you've offered a lift to I mean you may think that's too obvious I couldn't agree more but fuck, and he would say Tell me if I'm boring you. No one had ever asked me if he was boring me who wasn't, and I never knew what to say, or rather it always seemed as though the only possible answer was No and so I now said No not at all. I thought it would be better to change the subject so I asked for a drink.

He brought drinks from the kitchen and talked about this and that, showing me souvenirs from his travels and making comments by turns cynical and sentimental. He had a new computer, an Amstrad 1512 with two 5.25 inch floppy disk drives and 512 kilobytes of RAM. He said he had installed Norton Utilities to organise his files, and he turned it on to show how Norton Utilities worked.

I asked if it could do Greek. He said he didn't think so, so I didn't ask whether it could do anything else.

We sat down and to my horror I saw on a nearby small table a brand new book by Lord Leighton.

By Lord Leighton, of course, I don't mean the Hellenising late-Victorian painter of A Syracusan Bride Leading Wild Beasts in Procession and Greek

that power to a man who—sometimes I thought I could and once I even picked up the phone but when I thought about it I just couldn't. I would hear again his breathtaken boyish admiration for lovely stupidity his unswerving fidelity to the precept that ought implies cant and I just couldn't.

Liberace talked on and on and on. Gradually as we drank more drinks Liberace talked more and more and more and asked more and more if he was boring me, and as a result it seemed less and less possible to leave, because if he wasn't boring me why would I want to leave?

Then I thought, there must be some other way not to listen to all this, and of course there was a way. Surely Liberace had brought me back here to pick me up. It would be rude to put a hand over his mouth, but if I were to put my mouth on his mouth this would stop him talking just as well without being rude. His eyes were large, a clear glass green, rimmed with black like the eyes of a nocturnal animal; it seemed as though, if I only kissed him, not only would I not have to listen to him, but I would somehow be closer to the animal with these beautiful eyes.

He said something, and paused, and before he could say anything else I kissed him and there was a sudden, wonderful silence. It was silent except for the silly little laugh of Liberace, but once he had laughed it was over whereas there was no end to his conversation.

I was still drunk, and I was still trying to think of things I could do without being unpardonably rude. Well, I thought, I could sleep with him without being rude, and so I responded in a suitable manner as he unbuttoned the buttons of my dress.

This was a terrible mistake.

The wind is howling. A cold rain is falling. The brown paper window pane is flapping in the fierce rain and wind.

We are sitting in bed watching a masterpiece of modern cinema. I sat at the computer for three hours this morning, & allowing for interruptions typed maybe an hour and a half. At last I said I was going upstairs to watch Seven Samurai & L said he would too. L has read *Odyssey* 1–10; he has read the story of the Cyclops six times. He has also read a voyage of Sindbad the Sailor, three chapters of *Algebra Made Easy*, and a few pages each of *Metamorphoses, Kalilah wa Dimnah* and I Samuel following some scheme which I don't understand, and every single one involves a constant stream of questions.

I know or at least tell myself that it is better than Japanese (since at least I know the answers to maybe 80% of the questions), & I know I told him to do it. It took him a year to read the *Iliad* so I do not know how I could have known he would read 10 books of the *Odyssey* in three weeks.

It occurs to me that the Book of Jonah is just four pages long. Questions on Hebrew have got to be better than questions on Japanese. Wonder if it's too late to say I really meant Jeremiah.

I should be typing *Advanced Angling* as they want it back by the end of the week, but it seems important to preserve my sanity. It would be a false economy to forge ahead with typing until maddened to frenzy by an innocent child.

Also in the interests of sanity I have written nothing more for posterity in several days. I have been finding this rather depressing to write—writing of Mozart I thought suddenly of my mother blundering through the

accompaniment to Schubert lieder with my Uncle Buddy, *Jesus*, Buddy, said my mother, what's the *matter*, you sing like a Goddamned accountant, and slamming down the lid stormed out of my father's latest half-finished motel & off down the highway while my Uncle Buddy softly whistled a little tune & said nothing much. What's the use of remembering that?

I then thought of a priceless line I'd read somewhere or other: It is my duty as a mother to be cheerful. It is my duty as a mother to be cheerful, & so it is clearly my duty to watch a work of genius & abandon *Advanced Angling* & composition.

Kambei is samurai 1. He starts to recruit the rest.

He picks out a samurai in the street. He tells the farmer Rikichi to bring him to a fight. He tells Katsushiro to stand inside the door with a stick and bring it down. He sits inside waiting.

The samurai comes through the door, seizes the stick and throws Katsushiro to the floor. Kambei tells him the deal; he isn't interested.

Kambei picks another samurai.

Katsushiro stands inside with the stick. Kambei sits waiting.

2 comes to the door. He sees through the trick; he stands laughing in the street.

Gorobei knows the farmers have a hard time, but that's not why he accepts. He accepts because of Kambei.

I say to L: Kurosawa won a prize for a film he made before this one, called Rashomon, about a woman raped by a bandit; in that one he tells the story 4 times, & it's different each time someone tells it, but in this one he did something more complicated, he only tells the story once but you see it from about 8 points of view, you have to pay attention the whole time to see whether something seems to be true or is just what somebody says is true.

He says: Uh-huh. He is murmuring snatches of Japanese under his breath, & also reading the subtitles out loud.

3 doesn't have to pass the test. Shichiroji is an old friend of Kambei's. He'd given him up for dead.