

The maw that rends without tearing, the maggotty claw that serves you, what, my baby buttercup, prunes stewed softly in their own juices or a good slap in the face, there's no accounting for history in any event, even such a one as this one, O, we're knee-deep in this one, you and me, we're practically puppets, making all sorts of fingers dance above us, what do you say, shall we give it another whirl, we can go naked, I suppose, there's nothing to stop us and everything points in that direction, do you think there will be much music later and of what variety, we've that, at least, now that there's nothing left, though there's plenty of pieces to be gathered by the wool-coated orphans and their musty mums, they'll put us in warm wicker baskets, cover us with a cozy blanket of snow, and carry us home, walking carefully through the rubble and around the landmines, or visa versa, poor little laddy's lost his daddy, *pauvre* unminted lamb, you'd give him a chuck on the chin if you still had arms, sure as I'd pitch myself into a highland fling for the sake of the neighbors, but they say or at least said once and if we're very quiet we might hear them again, that all of us will reune with all of us when the time comes, our bits and pieces will cling-a-ling to our cores like fillings rag a magnet, think how big we'll be then, we'll spread from sea to see, sky's the limit for philomel and firmament, and there will be Indians and buffalo and a hero's welcome, I've always wanted a hero's welcome, it's due, said the capitulate archduke, doubtless they'll put us in long black cars and someone's sure to have a picnic, that's the beauty of it, someone's always sure to have a picnic, and we'll laugh when they salt and pepper their hard eggs and be glad to lend our long bones for rude goalposts,

what's that, that sound, nothing, you say, right again, nothing walks heavily, nothing stomps about, the big turd, carding its beard with a baleen comb, and lovingly licking the mirror in the eggcup, it fixes red-hot ingots to its ears and pirouettes in a pineneedle shawl, showing itself off to one and all, it's a braggart and a pimp, this nothing, ups the short hairs nonetheless, doesn't it, but that's all right, continue making your stew, sun's swallowed and we've plenty of hours to morn, assuming there's to be another dawn, I'm keeping the faith on that one, my friend, my comrade, my comparison, why I'd light a candle and pray, if I weren't afraid of snipers, still, a campfire seems safe enough, at least for cooking, no one'd be so mean as to shoot a man before his supper, what's the sport in that, better to let a body leisure and sup, knowing there's no time to digest, for it's utter contempt you're after, that and the absolute beauty of wasted sweet butter, it was important that the last bite taste better, though saltless, we've St. Maladroit to clap for that, the silvertongued one, he who proved birds traitors for singing what must be sung, thoughtless, *dolce*, thoughtless, still, perhaps the next one will use a beer batter, make a nice soda bread, slather it with the whitest spread, that's good shooting, my darling, right between hiccoughs, speaking of which, how's your arm, you complained earlier, though quietly, you didn't want to disturb my concentration, I was squeezing oranges into cans and setting up camp, there's so much to do before a battle, don't you agree, put shoes into trees and try our hair in different styles, I thoughtfully chalked some names and addresses on our backs to facilitate false identification of our remains, unfortunately it makes us better targets, but this sort of thing can't be helped, still, I heard you, for a cold moment I thought you were saying your morning prayers, till I remembered our night had fallen and tomorrow was a holiday, or will be, certainly they'll take time off to commemorate our exhausted sacrifice and someone else's dry valor with a parade and a picnic, someone will cook a chicken before or after as they always do, the cowards, but I'm looking forward to the little boy eating watermelon and the girl who

sucks a spoonful of Nutella while twisting her hair in rings around her forefinger, no, of course you don't, you lost your arms, I remember, wasn't I just asking you about that as well, you think I don't pay attention, but I do, you've no idea how much I care, why I cried when you lost your right arm, though I confess I was a bit annoyed about the left, it seemed careless at that point, and what was the point of that, surely you were signaling something, everyone's known for some time now there's meaning to be evacuated from everything, lined up and airlifted, not unlike Saigon, years from now, it was, we'll be so proud then, we'll see the world with the eyes of dead men, don't get technical, the thing is then we'll understand the raw fruit of our labors as if we'd set up a stand and sold them by the side of the road, and maybe we will, hang a white sign saying something and display them in green plastic baskets, like summer strawberries, or stack them in Euclidean pyramids, like melons or mangos or even apples, something with its seeds safely inside, that's the problem with history, you once said, spitting into the fire, it treats itself vegetable, or oak, you altered and opined, awkward it is, too, boasting of its spread and shade when you and I both know it's got nothing to go on about, and they'd see it too, in the next millennium, this time slouching to Brigadoon, but not in Jerusalem, watch it, now, laugh like that and you're sure to attract shooters, I'm telling you, next to picking off a man with a snootful of *cerises aux chocolat*, or a brandy Alexander, they like nothing better than to go gunning for the grinning, the sorry bastard busting a gut, there it goes, you can wave bye-bye to your intestine, if you still had arms, that is, again, but why are you complaining, you've got your legs, more than I can say, I've come permanently seated, lost them both at the knee in one fell bloody swoop, must have been a cannonball or missile or maybe a villanelle, I wasn't paying attention, leaving me my itemless list, unpinned as an unfoundling, with the same untoward prospects, and I loved those legs as well, especially the left, he followed the right so unthinkingly, he was a good soldier, if I can be so bold, he swung in a rhythm not his

own, quite contented, he was enormously attuned to the beat of the street and the sound of the violin, though he didn't care much for opera or what passes these days as poetry, he was a simpler sort, purer of heart, his mind unarticulated and most refined, why most evenings you'd find him propped on an Ottoman, one of the real ones, Oriental, with a pointed red hat and a furious mustache, most ornamental, though still and all a good Christian, couched in fickle malice, but the leg didn't mind, he was a good egg, name was Bob, he laughed at that one, said it suited him consonant, being nothing fancy, not like that other leg, Warrington, Warrington E. Wanderlick, or Augenblich, no, that's not it, he had no agnomination, didn't think he needed it, he was egg-proud, independent, struck out on his own each morning and never looked forward or back, I suppose in his own way he was decent enough, though somewhat stand-offish to good old Bob, now they're both gone and I'm not sure why, losing one leg is stuffed with significance, but to have both devested like a couple of breadcrumbs, what's the point of that, I'm not certain, I'm stumped, that's the truth of it, sure as I'm squatting poolside, though there's still the fire, and that's nice, given the dark, do you think the wolves're out yet, they ought be, the air's suffuse with the stench of brave young muscle, which by tomorrow'll be jugged meat, but no matter, the great beasts will slather the pale unwed flanks with spittle and savory barbeque, lick their lips, thickly purpled and caked at the corners with wet white foam, their eyes're Maundy Thursday moons and the heat from their beating tongues'd melt any man's mold and when's the last time you got eaten by a bit player in a fairy tale, sure it's an honor, it's an honor to be such a goner, if I had a hat, I'd doff it, lend me yours for a moment, that's a good man, there, there's a tip of the lid to what'll make a meal out of me and you, to the time-honored tradition of finding the creature inside whose potted stomach we might nestle safe and round, though you and I are hardly twins and Rome wasn't built in a day, not like today, but you have to start somewhere, especially to finish, and a dog's gut is as good as it gets for

a sonovabitch such as myself, I'm being modest, mostly, but you have to admit there's a striking resemblance between the halves of us, and if I still had my legs, you'd allow how we're about equal height in our stocking feet, I miss my legs, did I mention that, and my boots, beautiful in their very addition, beautiful as a lady's bare bottom, those skins stitched together with the care of a surgeon, one of the good ones, a set of silver pens in his breast pocket, and a cat's unsleeved touch, why those boots were alive, they breathed easy as kittens and stayed dog-faithful at the feet, they had the soles of a saint, ignorant of stones, slings and arrows, though not, I would qualify, impervious to the odd nail, they were long-suffering and lucky, lucky as a pair of sevens or a single eleven, lucky as four-leaf clovers and four-eyed Irishmen, not for me, naturally, but certainly for the one who got me, a tall blond man, I imagine, strapping, if that can still be said without blinking, big, in any event, a man with hands like hams and thighs the size of roast pigs, a happy man, content in his apple-scented way, a man who wipes his mouth with the back of a broad palm and keeps a dark pint running through the veins, a stout-hearted man in the days when there were such fellows, and ever shall be, if I'm any judge of the Almighty, the Lord God has seen fit in His Infinite to keep a steady supply of bricks and bracks on Hand, to create, one can copiously presume, aqueducts and arcades, bridges and barricades, cook's chambers and campanile, Darby & Joan, egesta and elevators, family trees and fantasies, geoducks and geographies, hibachis and high persuaded reliefs, incandescent lamps, the impresa of great gentlemen, jets, jerkins and joss houses, all ajumble, Kremlins and Kulturkamfs, languid lance corporals, major league Mahdi, the vertical spread of Mrs. Murphy's bed, nabobs, netherworlds, Oregon and onanistic ontology, pater's noster and the queen's quadrangle, riverrun with steelhead rocketships, sarcophagi and sarsaparilla, sugar-free soda water, suitable for silksoaks, tin tabernacles and throbbing temples, the salted substitution of you for me and visa versa, wonder and winsome exultation, the reptilian