

Monument

A small war had ended. Like all wars, it was terrible. Things which had stood in existence were now vanished. I had come back because I had survived and survivors come back, there is nothing else left for them to do. I had been on long travels connected to the war, and I had been to the centerpiece of the war, that acre of conflagration. And now I was sitting on a park bench, watching ducks land and take off from a pond. They too had survived, though I had no way of knowing if they were the same ducks from before the war or if they were the offspring of ducks who had died in the war. It was a warm day in the capital and people were walking without coats, dazed by the warmth, which was not the heat of war, which had engulfed them, but the warmth of expansion, in which would grow the idea of a memorial to the war, which had ended, and of which I was a veteran architect. I knew I would be called upon for my ideas in regards to this memorial and I had entered the park aimlessly, trying to escape my ideas, as I had been to the centerpiece, that acre of conflagration, and from there the only skill that returned was escapement, any others died with those who possessed them. I was dining with friends that evening, for the restaurants and theatres and shops had reopened, the capital was like a great tablecloth being shaken in midair so that life could be smoothed and reset and go on, and I had in my mind a longing to eat, and to afterwards order my favorite dessert, cherries jubilee, which would be made to flame and set in the center of the table, and I had in my mind the idea of submitting to the committee a drawing of an enormous plate of cherries, perpetually burning, to be set in the center of the park, as a memorial to the war, that acre of conflagration. And perhaps also in my mind was the hope that such a ridiculous idea would of course be ignored and as a result I would be left in peace, the one thing I desired, even beyond cherries. And I could see the committee, after abandoning my idea, remaining in their seats fighting over the

designs of others, far into the after-hours of the work day, their struggles never seeming to end, and then I wanted to submit an idea of themselves as a memorial for the war, the conference table on an island in the middle of the pond, though at least some of them would have to be willing to die in the enactment. And then I saw on the ground an unnamed insect in its solitary existence, making its laborious way through tough blades of grass that threatened its route, and using a stick that lay nearby I drew a circle around the animal – if you can call him that – and at once what had been but a moment of middling drama became a theatre of conflict, for as the insect continued to fumble lopsided in circles it seemed to me that his efforts had increased, not only by my interest in them, but by the addition of a perimeter which he now seemed intent on escaping. I looked up then, and what happened next I cannot describe without a considerable loss of words: I saw a drinking fountain. It had not suddenly appeared, it must have always been there, it must have been there as I walked past it and sat down on the bench, it must have been there yesterday, and during the war, and in the afternoons before the war. It was a plain gunmetal drinking fountain, of the old sort, a basin on a pedestal, and it stood there, an ordinary object that had become an unspeakable gift, a wonder of civilization, and I had an overwhelming desire to see if it worked, I stood up then and approached it timidly, as I would a woman, I bent low and put my hand on its handle and my mouth hovered over its spigot – I wanted to kiss it, I was going to kiss it – and I remembered with a horrible shock that in rising from the bench I had stepped on and killed the insect, I could hear again its death under my left foot, though this did not deter me from finishing my kiss, and as the water came forth with a low bubbling at first and finally an arch that reached my mouth, I began to devise a secret route out of the park that would keep me occupied for some time, when I looked up, holding the miraculous water in my mouth, and saw the ducks in mid-flight, their wings shedding water drops which returned to the pond, and remembered in amazement that I could swallow, and I did, then a bit of arcane knowledge returned to me from an idle moment of reading spent years ago, before the war: that a speculum is not only an

instrument regarded by most with horror, as well as an ancient mirror, and a medieval compendium of all knowledge, but a patch of color on the lower wing segments of most ducks and some other birds. Thus I was able, in serenest peace, to make my way back to my garret and design the memorial which was not elected and never built, but remained for me an end to the war that had ended.

instrument regarded by most with horror, as well as an ancient mirror, and a medieval compendium of all knowledge, but a patch of color on the lower wing segments of most ducks and some other birds. Thus I was able, in serenest peace, to make my way back to my garret and design the memorial which was not elected and never built, but remained for me an end to the war that had ended.