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under the dam

David Constantine

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The Loss

Nobody noticed. Apparently they never do. Or if they do, they misunderstand. It might be one of those sudden pauses – a silence, a gap – and somebody will say: An angel is passing. But it is no such thing. It is the soul leaving, flitting ahead to its place in the ninth circle.

Mr Silverman looked up, looked round. All the men were still there, the men and the one or two successful women, all still there. He resumed his speech. Perhaps he had never faltered in it. He continued, he reached the end. He invited questions, some needed answers almost as long as a speech. Then it was over, he saw that he had been successful. They were smiling, they wanted what he wanted. One after the other they came and shook him by the hand, called him by his first name, congratulated him, wished him a safe journey. Seeing them dwindle – soon fewer than half remained – Mr Silverman became fearful and, in some degree, also curious. Truly, had nobody noticed? He feared they had, and all the world henceforth would be gilded with pretence. Or he feared they had not, and he must go on now in the fact, enclosed in the fact, and nobody noticing. He took a big man by the sleeve and turned with him to the window in an old gesture of confidence. The big man – whose name was Raingold, who liked to be addressed as Ed – inclined to him, listening, frequently nodding, bespeaking friendliness with every fibre of his suit and with every pore of his naked skin where it showed in his hands and in his large and dappled face. But Mr Silverman, speaking quietly, aware that at his

back there were others waiting to wish him on his way – Mr Silverman felt that it was too warm in the room and too cold outside in sunny Manhattan and that the plate glass between the warm and the terrible cold was surely quite impermeable. Mysterious then, the loss, the quitting. Would an adept be able to see his loss, like the dusty shape of a bird against the glass? It must be that the molecules of glass give way for the passage of a soul intent on reaching hell.

They were very high up, somewhere in the early hundreds. The surrounding towers of steel and glass seemed to be swaying slightly or rippling like a backcloth, but it was only an effect of light and shadows and clouds and reflections in the freezing wind. The towers were quite as stable as before. Yes, said Mr Silverman, tugging at the good cloth of Ed Raingold's sleeve, went very well, I should say. What would *you* say? Went *very* well, Ed Raingold said. And he added, beaming down, You can do it, Bob. In Mr Silverman's wonderment, in his honest puzzlement, there was a fine admixture of contempt. Had nobody noticed? Did it really not matter whether he had a soul or not?

At death, as is well known, the body lightens by a certain amount: twenty-one grams, in all cases. Aha, we say, that must be the weight of the human soul. The cadaver varies greatly. I saw a teenager the other day who must have weighed twenty stone. It was in the new mall at the old Pier 17. The food in there is on an upper floor and she stood at the foot of the escalator, wondering did she dare ascend or not. She wore a decoration in her hair, like antennae, such as elves and fairies are seen wearing in Victorian prints. On the other hand, one of those infants in, say, Ethiopia, can't weigh more than a pound or two. But the loss at death, apparently, will be the same.

But waking next morning Mr Silverman did not feel lighter. On the contrary, he felt heavier. Imagine a blob of lead implanted in you overnight; or that some organ,

roughly kidney-sized, has been converted to lead during your sleep. So it was. Hard to say where exactly: at the back of the head, in the region of the heart, in the pit of the belly? It seemed to shift. Wherever he pressed his hand, there it was not. Perhaps it could dissolve and occupy him thoroughly, like a heavy flu. He dozed and dreamed.

Shaken awake again by his early-morning call – he had an aeroplane to catch to Singapore – Mr Silverman sat on the bed and tried to weep. He shook, he strained, he sobbed, but the tears that came were not much more than the wetness of a few snowflakes on his cheeks. No relief. He took a shower, he wandered naked around the overheated room. Again and again, touching, he received little shocks, from doorhandles, switches, a metal frame – quite sharp little shocks. They startled him, in little jolts they frightened him through his fingers to his heart. He collected them, each time giving forth a small yelp, until the room was dead. Then he looked out of the window. He was high, in the nineties, the sun was visiting the upper reaches of the towers. Down below – Mr Silverman looked down – all the silent hurry was deep in shade. Which was worse? The measurement of remoteness in no company but his own? Or proof of it when he clutched at Ed Raingold? Mr Silverman foresaw an icy interest in the ways and means and relative degrees of horror.

Car. Airport. Aeroplane. Singapore. Passing – so muffled, steady, multitudinous the tread – towards Baggage Reclaim, Mr Silverman saw an extraordinary thing. There was carpet, glass, more and more glass, and falling from everywhere like vaporized warm piss, there was the usual music: but the extraordinary thing was a bird, a common sparrow by the look of it, high up against a ceiling, perhaps only an inner ceiling, of sunny glass, beating and fluttering. Natural that the creature should seek the light and whatever sustaining air was still available outside, but incredible that it should ever have got where it was now. Nothing living ever came in there,

blind-dogs or bomb-dogs perhaps in the service of humans, but nothing else that lived, except the humans in transit. Perhaps not even microbes got in there, only the humans, marching in their gross forms, but never a bird, certainly never a common sparrow, but there it was, fluttering, beating its life out against the sunny glass. That was the last pure astonishment in Mr Silverman's remaining years. A sparrow against the glass ceiling on the way to Baggage Reclaim! It was also, he acknowledged later, the last occasion on which he might have wept. Yes, he said, had I stepped aside and gone down on my knees on that thick carpet and bowed my head into my hands, knowing the bird against the ceiling high above me, then, God be my witness, I could have wept, the tears would have burst through my fingers, I might have cupped my hands and raised them up like a bowl, brimful with an offering of my final tears. Mysterious, the afterlife, lingering a while between New York and Singapore, between landing and Baggage Reclaim, an afterlife in which he might have wept.

But Mr Silverman was met at Arrivals by a smiling driver holding up a card which read: Mr Bob Silverman. Fidelity Investments; and soon, among smiling people, he was proceeding through his routine. Two days of meetings and presentations, all successful. He steered the company into wanting what he wanted. He had a clear mind, he set out the facts and figures clearly, he made shapely arguments, his conclusions were ungainsayable. No wonder he was so successful! He was a born persuader, persuading came as naturally to him as playing golf or the violin did to other mortals. And all the while it was like ventriloquy. He stood aside, listening to his own voice; he could even see it, his own embodied voice, and himself standing aside, observant.

In Singapore the rooms were, if anything, rather cool and the air outside (the little of it he had felt in passing to and from the car), if anything, rather warm. But the rooms were

very high, in the hundreds, and the towers all around, very densely rising, looked – to Mr Silverman – liable to crumple at any moment. The men coming up to congratulate him and to wish him a safe onward journey were less tall than he was, they were slighter, but they were dressed like him and from behind their glasses they beamed on him with an almost ferocious admiration. When their numbers dwindled, again he clutched at a sleeve, stood at a window, speaking the words and the body-language of an old condescension. But he felt the leaden implant somewhere in his body, and suffered little starts of indignation that it mattered nothing to these successful gentlemen whether he stood and moved and had his being among them with a soul or without. Alone then, he had the distressing thought that perhaps it had never mattered; and a shadow fell like lead over all his past, all the life before his loss withered and died when he entertained the certainty that it had never mattered, he would have done just as well, he would have got just as high, even without a living soul in him. It had never been required of him that he have one.

He was met at Heathrow by his wife, Mrs Silverman. He looked her in the eyes, to see would she notice. She seemed not to. He kissed her with some force on the lips. Was it palpable there on the lips, as a shock of cold perhaps? Apparently not. She had brought the two children with her. It was easier than finding someone to look after them. She asked him had he had a successful trip. Yes, he said, very; watching, would she notice? Then he asked after her life in the interim. Busy, she said, and detailed the difficulties. Then husband and wife were silent, driving in dense traffic, and the children on the back seat were silent too. He sensed his wife returning to her own preoccupations and he saw beyond any doubt that what had happened to him would never happen to her. She was fretted to the limits of her strength, she had days, weeks, being almost overwhelmed; but below or beyond

all that there was something continuing in her for which it was indeed required that she have a soul. Bleak, the few insights in Mr Silverman's remaining years. Before a man struggles to retain his living soul he must first be persuaded that he needs one.

Mr Silverman began to notice other men and women to whom the loss had happened. Angels wandering the world in human disguise are said always to recognize one another. Likewise the clan to which Mr Silverman now belonged. In one gathering or another, to his mild surprise, he knew and was known by his desolate kind. They were from all walks of life. At least, he met them in the few walks of life that he and Mrs Silverman had any knowledge of. Successful people. For example, at a Christmas party somewhere just outside the M25 he was introduced to a successful academic. They saw, each in the other, the fact of it. What to say? Nothing really. There was no warmth between them.They stood side by side, their backs to the company, looking down a garden at the fairylights in a dead tree. The academic, a Dr Blench, said: Most of what we know about the ninth circle comes from Dante, of course. And he had an axe to grind. But the ice must be true, wouldn't you say? Mr Silverman hadn't read Dante, didn't know about the ice, but at once acknowledged, after a few more words from Dr Blench, that what Dante reported on the ice must indeed be true. The thing I haven't quite worked out, Dr Blench continued, is why he says it is traitors that it happens to. I mean, are you a traitor? I don't think I am. So perhaps he got that wrong, even if the ice is right.

Driving home round the M25 Mr Silverman thought about treachery. Was he a traitor? Was he even a liar? Whom had he betrayed? Whom had he ever lied to? He glanced at his wife. She was concentrating on her driving among all the lights in a good deal of rain and spray. But he thought again: it will never happen to her. When she can relax a little she will

revert to her own concerns, and for those a soul is necessary. Still he did not think that his worst enemy or the Recording Angel could assert with any truth that he had betrayed his wife. Two or three times on his business trips he had been with a prostitute. In Tokyo they sent one up to his room on the 141st floor, without his asking, as a courtesy. But always he told Mrs Silverman when he came home, said how sorry he was, how joyless it had been. He could not honestly say that she had forgiven him. He would have to say she had made him feel there was nothing to forgive. She appraised him, shrugged. She lingered over it briefly, as though it were a strange but characteristic thing. She seemed to be gauging whether it touched her or not, and to be deciding, with a shrug, that it did not. For a while he had even sustained a sort of affair, with a woman in Frankfurt, a secretary at several of his presentations. She told him he was a very persuasive man. They had sex together for a while whenever he flew in. But he confessed that also to Mrs Silverman, said it was nothing very much, and she contemplated him and the fact of it briefly and seemed to concur: it was nothing much. So he was not a traitor, he was not a liar, not to her at least, his wife, his closest companion on the upper earth. To whom else then?

Nothing much more to say about the remaining years – many years, interminable, as it sometimes seemed – of Mr Silverman's living death. Heeding the sort of information that must inevitably come, by accident or by grace and favour, to a man in his position, Mr Silverman shifted some money very advantageously, for the benefit of Mrs Silverman and her growing children. He told her so, with some wan satisfaction, quite without personal pride, and she appraised him as she had done when he told her about the prostitutes and about the secretary he had for a while had sex with in Frankfurt: thanked him, nodded, as though it were both very strange and very characteristic. And he watched her vanishing behind her eyes, to where she really belonged.

Mr Silverman thought a good deal about the ice. He connected it with his inability to weep – and rightly so. One evening in the lift, ascending very rapidly to the 151st floor in Manhattan or Tokyo or Frankfurt or Singapore, he found himself the sole companion of another of his kind, a bigger man than himself, in a suit of excellent cloth, wearing a confident loud tie and a very big signet ring on his left little finger. The man – Sam's my name, he said – told him at once about a particularly bad ending (if it was an ending) that had just come to his knowledge. The doors opened, Sam and Mr Silverman stood together on the hushed corridor. Sam continued. The man in question – he must surely be one of us – had taken an ice-axe to his own face, raised it in desperation against himself, in the firm belief, so the story went, that his face, indeed his entire head, was enclosed in a bulky helmet of ice, in the desperate illusion raising the ice-pick against himself, to make a way through to his eyes, to give exit to the tears that were, so he believed, welling up in there, hot melting tears welling up and not allowed to flow.

The Necessary Strength

'That horse makes me nervous,' Judith said. 'I don't like him being here.' 'He's all right,' said Max. 'We can do them a favour, I suppose.' Judith said nothing, but in silence took issue with both 'we' and 'them'. It was early evening, Max's time for being with his family – a pity, as he said himself, to spoil it by quarrelling. They were in the living-room, and against the large west window, full up against it in the teeming sun, the white horse pressed his face. The girls thought him funny; Max said that such a white long head with blinding sun behind it was a wonderful phenomenon; but it made Judith nervous, there was a quite deep gap between the house wall and where the horse stood lunging at the windowpane, and she feared he might fall in there and come through with a smash and a great deal of blood; and besides, his orange tongue and the slaver he made on the window disgusted her.

Megan asked could she ride the horse. Max said he didn't see why not, he would ask Ellie when he saw her next; but Judith said no she couldn't, the horse was too big and being on his own all the time made him peculiar and dangerous. Then the sunny room, with its western view of a bay of the silver sea, was crossed with strains and bitternesses, everyone fell silent and the horse stared in at them.

Judith stood up, with her book. She would go and read at the other side of the house, as far away from the horse as possible, though there was no sun in that room, it would be cold and to read she would need a light on. Max and the girls

looked at her. She could wring their hearts merely by standing up, for then her smallness of stature was apparent and, if she took a step, her crippling at the hips. 'Stay,' said Max. 'It's nicer in here.' All three looked at her. The sun was merciless: it showed the cavernous darkness around her eyes. But her eyes were a sapphire blue, shockingly beautiful however familiar they might become to anybody. The alignment of her husband and her daughters, though one of pity, was still an alliance against her, she felt; and standing there she forgot her intention and felt merely apart and sad.

The horse turned, and chased away. Judith sat down again with the girls, and drew them in close, to look at their paintings. Esther's was of a house, any house, with flowers, a welcoming path, a curl of smoke; Megan's was of a loch, its blue surface almost snowed over with water lilies. 'What a sight!' said Max at the window. The horse was by the far fence, where the ground fell away to the rocky beach. 'A white horse, and the sun getting more and more red.' In him, like a reflex, whenever Judith had moved him to love and pity, came concern for himself. Soon then, rather sooner than usual, he said he must work and the girls went to kiss him goodnight. That done, he climbed the aluminium ladder out of the living-room into the loft above it, where he worked. He took very little time to settle, they heard his movements on the floor, their ceiling; then nothing. He was working.

Judith sat on, with the children. She loved that room and was glad not to have left it. It was where she taught the children in the mornings while their father slept. There were charts on the walls and posters and work the girls had done; vases of flowers and grasses on the windowsills; and in a corner, almost too small now even for Esther, stood an ancient cramped school desk. She took Esther against her and sang softly in Yiddish. The girls were hard to get to bed in summer. Even gone midnight it was never properly dark. Megan left off painting and went to the window. 'That horse

is crazy,' she said. Esther was asleep. Had Judith been stronger she would have carried her away to bed. As it was, she sat there, dozing herself, and the ancient songs continued in her head. She wanted strength, she was dozing, soodling, and worrying at the question of the necessary strength when suddenly – a shock to her – she heard Max cross the floor above and saw his feet coming down out of the hole that was the entry into his own space. It was a shock, she could not remember when he had last broken off work and come back down into the living-room while his wife and children were still there. Megan at the window turned his way in amazement. 'What's the matter?' Judith asked. Esther woke up. 'The sunset is extraordinary,' said Max. 'We must go out and look at it.'

Judith was angry. All the sunsets at Acha were extraordinary. Why come down for this one? But because he had, the children were excited. If he came down, as he never had before, it was an occasion and they must all go out. Esther was wide awake. Megan felt curious, thrilled, apprehensive.

They all went out. The house stood in its own field that sloped away to the fence and a gate above the beach. The ground was rough, the children ran ahead, Max came after with Judith whose progress was slow. Half way down she halted. 'This will do,' she said, and contemplated the sky. There was a bar of luminous cloud across the whole view, but no sun visible, so that for a moment she thought Max must have been mistaken and the show was finished. 'No, wait,' said Max. 'It's just beginning.' And he laid an arm around her shoulders and so ushered her into a proper contemplation of the phenomenon. The sun drooped like something melting, all out of shape, down from the band of cloud. Slowly it eased itself into the gap between the cloud and the line of the sea, and there recovered its roundness and intensified its colour. The rays came over the water, over the fence, over the

field almost horizontally, a queer orange light. The children were at the fence, on the low ferny cliff above the sea, and into the light, from nowhere as it seemed, approaching them, flushed by the sun, came the white horse. Judith started forward but Max held her back. 'He's all right. Only look at the sun on him.' There was a breeze off the sea and in thin clothes Judith was shivering. The sun seemed to have halted. The horse, leaving the children, walked towards her and Max in a very measured way. 'Phenomenal,' said Max. The creature was aureoled around by an orange golden light, but Judith said: 'I'm cold.' It would be twenty minutes before the sun, and all its extraordinary after-effects, finally vanished. 'See,' said Max, 'it goes down on a slope.' It would dip for only a couple of hours below the rim, and in its descent was dragged off the vertical by the pull of the north. 'So beautiful,' said Max.

'I'm going in,' said Judith. Night after night was beautiful. Why come down for this? Why bring everyone out? Why excite the children so late? 'Keep them away from the horse,' she said. 'And you put them to bed.' She limped in. Max turned to watch. She was too small for such large effects, and the tufted ground threw her from side to side. But her thin white blouse took colour like the horse's coat, and the house's windows blazed.

She lay in bed, angry, brooding on Max's descent into the living-room out of his upstairs lair. How he could do as he pleased, to trouble her; and all the old griefs revived. There had never been any discussion over whose the new room should be. The girls could have had a room each. It was wonderfully light, a skylight, a west and a south window. Now she never went up there, the ladder hurt her, it was too steep, as he must have known it would be. For months, her hips worsening, she had not been up there, not even climbed high enough to poke her head in and see what work he was doing in that place apart, that den all his to climb up to and climb

down from above the living-room in the family house. She heard him come in and put the girls to bed – or heard him instruct Megan to put Esther to bed. Then heard him go downstairs again, not looking in on her; heard him in the kitchen making coffee; heard him go through to his aluminium ladder. Slowly the room darkened, but never completely. There was a cuckoo, all night; and worse, blundering in among her dreams, she heard the horse in the gap or trench behind the house, rubbing and banging against the outside wall. He had all the field under a vast summer sky, but chose instead to shove and snuffle around their dwelling where it was darkest and where he did not belong.

Max was working. In very fine pencil he was drawing bones. He might spend a whole night on a couple of sheep's vertebrae, or on the mechanics of its upper leg, the jointing. On a skull, on the wriggling script where the segments fitted, on the accommodation for the eyeballs, teeth and spinal cord, on the chambers, passages, apartments, all the housing, easily he could expend a month of silent nights. He learned the precise form and fit of these components, but also their texture on the surface and inside, healthy and in the pitting and delicate honeycombing and filigree of decay, clean as a whistle or stained in peat, bracken, weed. Nearly all his sorties from the house were in search of bones or bone-like things. On the beach he got dry claws and carapaces and the ridged and stippled casings of sea-urchins. In summer, more restless, at three or four in the morning, in the queer light with the sleepless crying birds he went out foraging, he crossed the thin pale road and entered the pathless wasteland of mauve rock, black peat, every shade of boggy green, and tumbling white water. Up there he found antlers, some still bloody at the base where they had left the living head, others cast years ago and shortened by corrosion. He found pebbles of quartz, like fossilized eyeballs, and lichens that are the

dryest and least ample life there is. Up there the roots of the old Caledonian pines shone in the golden bogwater like giant starfish. Wood like that he approved of: hard and pale as bone. There was a particular river which, disregarding its Gaelic name, he called the Bone River. High up in it a carcase had lodged, and over months, by water with the help of a few crows, all the weight and stink and fleshly substantiality was got away and the animal disarticulated and passed downstream and Max collected it in pieces for his work.

Once he found the skull of a horse, came home with it under his arm, re-entered the sleeping house, climbed out of the living-room into his working space and there and then, until the children woke and it was time for him to go to bed, he began to draw the find that was as long, large, intricate and fascinating as many an animal entire.

In winter he made almost no excursions but kept to his upper room, and the dead but brilliant moon shone in at him through the skylight. He worked, on a high stool at a draughtsman's tilted desk, clamping the bones at the angle he wanted them, lighting them as he liked, and transferring them as exactly as his eye and hand and the fine tip of a pencil could do it, to paper. And when he had got them exactly, on scores of white sheets, then out of them in colours that were barely colours, using brushes sometimes as fine as a nerve end, he composed the pictures that were his speciality. He took bone, precisely observed, as his base and real material, and lifted out from it into beautiful chilly abstractions.

Now and then, while he was sleeping, the girls climbed up into his space. Megan fingered and weighed the white objects – they were all around, on every shelf and surface – and looked through the folders thoughtfully. Esther made a cosy home in the corner, with her dolls. But Judith never came up, and he knew she did not. Her crippled hips would have made

it very difficult; and besides, as he knew, she had grown to loathe his work.

Ellie came down to ride her horse. Judith watched her return, along the sea's edge at a canter. Yes, she was fit to be looked at. She was the image of freedom and wellbeing. On impulse, when she had stowed away her gear in the shed as Max had said she could, Judith invited her in. It was early evening. Max was still sitting with his family in the sunny living-room. 'Here's Ellie,' Judith said. Suddenly she took an interest in this girl and began to question her, gently but to the point. Why had she given up university? What did she think she would do in Acha, where there was no work, nobody her age, nothing to stimulate her intelligence? Ellie was not averse to trying to answer, but in the course of every attempt she glanced repeatedly towards Max, to see how she was doing. 'How beautiful she is,' said Judith to herself, 'and she is in love with him.' Ellie had found university harsh and cynical. There was no one you could talk to about things that really mattered, the boys only wanted sex and her teachers were always making fun. In the end it upset her, she stopped eating, she had come home, she was still not better from it. Sitting there in the beams of the sun, continually pushing back her heavy dark hair, she looked, Judith thought, too beautiful for her own good. Her face, flushed from riding when she came in, was pale as the moon now, luminously pale, her skin of an almost transparent purity. Still without vehemence Judith pressed her. Women needed their independence, they had to be competent, get qualifications, be always able to take their own lives in hand. Ellie shrugged, was lost for words, looked to Max. 'Ellie loves this place,' he said. 'Don't you have to work?' Judith asked him, and when he said no, not for a little while, she stood up and with a decisiveness that quite outweighed her lameness she left the room and came back with whisky and three glasses. She poured out, and said: 'If