

Lloyd Abbey / THE JEWISH QUESTION

Now there were no more excuses for staying awake: his grandmother had read to him from *The Adventures of Jerry Muskrat* and, when he had begged her not to leave, she'd turned on his nightlight and brought out his cotton Peter Rabbit from the bottom drawer of the bureau where he hid it during the day. "You're too old for that," his father had said. "Our secret," his grandmother had said, slipping the rabbit into his arms and wetly kissing him with her thumbed-down mouth. As soon as she left, the shadows filled with shapes. Lying perfectly still, he relived what she'd read: Jerry Muskrat getting caught in the trap, then wriggling free. The story moved him. What was it like to be a muskrat? He raised his hands to his face, cupped them, and rubbed lightly down both sides of his nose as if he were a muskrat cleaning its whiskers.

He was very drowsy, but always hated to go to sleep. Always he fought sleep till the last minute. Now he could tell by the darkness at the top of the bedroom door that his parents had adjourned to the livingroom. He enjoyed eavesdropping on them when they were happy, but the livingroom was too far away for that. His lids were heavy. His father had said he should pray before going to sleep but he wasn't certain what praying was and, anyway, his mother discouraged it. It was puzzling. The cross around grandmother's

neck sometimes made him think of the cross at the church where his father had taken him. That cross at the church, and other crosses, had Jesus hanging on them. Jesus Christ. A thin, pale man bleeding to death. A shock when they first had told him; he hadn't realized it at first; he had thought that Jesus Christ just belonged on the cross the way that a bird belongs on a branch: his perch, his resting-place. But that was obviously wrong. He frowned to himself. In his grandmother's bedroom there was a picture of a whale with harpoons in its back and brave men chasing it through the ocean. It was just on the other side of the wall, in the closet-like room of his grandmother. It hung there like a religious scene: something about the colouring, the frame. But it wasn't the same as the piercing of Christ. It wasn't *for him*. And, besides, Christ had *died* on the cross but, in the print, it looked like the whale just might escape; his tail had already smashed one of the boats, men leaping free. What happened next? He must ask his grandmother. He clutched the rabbit's ears, closing his eyes.

Just as he was on the verge of sleep, he started to hear his grandmother reading on the other side of the wall. She was reading her own book now, for herself, and, when she grew lost in it, her voice took on its own life, like the chanting voice of the pastor. Her books were thick, with very few pictures. Long ago she had been a schoolteacher in Englee and her husband, before he had died, had butchered whales in the Williamsport factory in Fourche Harbour. That was Newfoundland—a place he had never been—there was ocean there. This was southern Ontario—no whales, just fish and muskrats in freshwater creeks. In her old age his grandmother missed the great Fin Whales and the squid-hunting Pilot Whales that beached themselves each spring in gasping rows along Trinity Bay. Her Bible was Melville. As he dozed off, he heard her chant grow louder and higher. The muskrat dimmed out of mind now and new pictures took its place. Sleep was a voyage on his grandmother's voice, a voyage to the whales, to the open sea. His parents could hear. You could hear her all over the house at night. She was almost singing:

"And thus, through the serene tranquillities of the tropical sea, among waves whose handclappings were suspended by exceeding rapture, Moby Dick moved on, still withholding from sight the full terrors of his submerged trunk, entirely hiding..."

"Shhht! Mother! Could you be quieter please? It's keeping Meg awake."

"What?"

"Mother!"

"Oh. I'm sorry."

The boy put his ear up close to the wall. The voices dropped low now, as if they knew he was listening. The conversation was agitated. Something to do with "Jerry Muskrat." Whisper. Whisper. Then the father's voice suddenly high:

"They bring a dollar SEVENTY-FIVE. And it adds up—not much, God knows—but it's just the same as Newfoundland, mother. Nothing has changed. I trap so we can *have* things. We need the money."

Then her voice: very hurt, very shrill, indecipherable—but his father's reply was calm and clear.

"No, mom. I DROWN them. It's a merciful way to die."

His heart was pounding; he drew his ear away lest they hear his heartbeat pounding through the wall. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. The words "Jerry Muskrat" came again, and then his father, in a sorrowful voice that hurt him, was pleading: "I wish you wouldn't. It makes me look bad with the boy."

Her voice grew shrill once more and he heard his father compromising, commiserating, soothing her down toward sleep. Then his mother's voice shot from the hall. "What's going on?" "Just a minute, Meg." The house went still; he heard only the footsteps of his father in the hall; then there was nothing. He waited, waited, heart settling down now. Then from the darkness, lower, softer, hardly discernible, he heard it again as he fell asleep: the tale of the white whale.

The muskrat swam the creek, his nose V-ing the surface, head and back slightly breaking the water. His propulsion came from his webbed hind feet that kicked with a duck-like stroke while his ineffectual front legs treadmilled the stream. In the reed hut a half-mile up creek, the supply of sedges had thinned and, meanwhile, the thaw had opened the ice. Thrashing his tail from side to side, the muskrat relished his freedom of motion.

Despite the moon, there were thick shadows. Here and there, where the muskrat veered for the bank, lush tender shoots of arrowhead broke the surface. All night he'd been gorging on waterplants. Although it was spring, his hoarding instinct was still strong, and from time to time he would turn back for the hut, his cheeks filled with waterplants that trailed and wavered the length of

his twelve-inch sides. But he was travelling downstream now. Other rats, travelling upstream, described broad Vs in the moon. Some of these had wintered in his own den—a structure of sticks and reeds, lined with vegetable stores. Occasionally he passed a rat he did not recognize. He was sensitive to their scent. At the base of his tail his own oval musk-sacks were swelling with scent and his appetite was insatiable, awakening from four months' semi-starvation.

The apple-smell from the shoreline struck his nostrils palpably. He turned and headed straight in, the scent intensifying. The trap was submerged an inch below the surface, ahead of the apple. When his right foot touched the V-plate of the trap and the jaws closed over it, he screamed, then lashed out, thrashing, snapping the bone; still, the leg remained wedged in the trap and, when he dove, the chain of the trap, about a foot and a half, arrested him—though he could feel the jaws give slightly, he couldn't tug free.

He turned back toward the surface. The trap was a great weight and it took all his strength to rise. He had dived out of instinct, just as the man had known he would. Vaguely now he sensed his mistake. When he managed to push his nostrils out of the water his heartbeat was loud, a great sun pulsing inside his head, though now the pain made everything dim. He tried to stay up, to swim for shore, but the weight wouldn't let him. He thrashed his leg. If he could snap it off. . . .

In a desperate effort he dove to the end of the chain. The trap arrested him. In the water it was impossible to chew the foot away; still he attempted it—he squealed at his own sharp bites. Blood filled the water. The diving and rising went on and on, the trap growing heavier each time. He rolled on one side and floated tail-first, the current billowing his fur: a bubbling flower of fur that swayed on its red stem.

He walked behind his father along the creek. His dad had a khaki pack on his back, too heavy, when full of traps, for the boy even to move. His father wore high boots and shifted his weight so that his shoulders rose and fell. When the boy looked up at his father's shoulders the sun was dazzling; he kept on falling behind and running to catch up.

The creek was in full flood. Patches of ice jutted out from the banks—brittle ice, with dirty snow on top. Icicles hung in hollows in the banksides and there were margins of snow-covered ice beside the shores. The water was fast: white and

brown. It boiled up, chipped off chunks of ice, and instantly carried them off. If you stood on the rim and looked hard, it made you dizzy. The creek almost drew you in: there were swirls and crosscurrents and sudden jumps, as if it were after you. He liked the loud roar of the water, how it tore things out of its way. He liked the crash of the icicles inside the banks and the streams that jumped and broke down the banksides.

His father stopped at a white log, climbed down the bank, took the axe from his pack, and chipped through the ice. It didn't take long to locate the burrow, a foot below surface. There were two rats. One, belly-up, had the trap around its tail; the other was suspended, still, head-down.

He called to his son up the bankside.

"We've got two! Two of them!"

But the boy said nothing.

Taking no notice, he put the rats in the sack, then set and rebaited the traps, submerging them a few inches under the surface.

He clambered up the steep bank, the heavy pack tugging his collar, his boots kicking footholds in the mud. Twice he slid backwards, losing half the ground he had gained. Mud plastered his jacket. The boy stood at the top, watching the thick hands grasp at crevices in the bankside. All he could see were the hands; blunt creatures coming toward him. As the hands and the head got closer, his father's breath rose over the brink. He clambered past the edge, sun blazing behind him.

"Two rats," he said. "It's not a *total* loss!"

He bent down on one knee and clutched the boy's right shoulder. "Not a total loss, I said."

The boy sensed his father's anger. But he himself was filled with rage. He didn't think his father cruel, but the sight of the muskrats or, worse, the sight of the small black feet they left behind them in the traps, filled him with pity.

Trying to get a response from his son, the man extended his smile until the lines around his mouth met the diagonal clefts that ran down from his nose. Then he narrowed his blue eyes, ridging his forehead. His huge hand tightened on the shoulder. The boy said nothing. Finally the father withdrew his hand. "Okay," he muttered. He stood up and started walking.

His father opened the door, flicked the wall switch, and he followed him down to the cellar. The centre was bright with bulbs but shadows blackened the sides. The pit by the foot of the stairs held the water pressure system, the floor so thick that the sides were concrete all the way down, though it had a sand bottom, where the toad lived on slugs from the drain.

The muskrats hung by their tails from the middle ceiling-beam. He followed his dad to the row: nineteen, the driest ones by the stairs—they'd been hanging half a week—and this evening's catch at the other end, water dripping from teeth and paws. The ceiling was so high that his father had to stretch as he took down the dry ones. The boy stood beneath him, looking up. The lips of the muskrats were slightly parted, showing yellow teeth, and the eyes still shone as if watching.

His father bunched the tails in his right hand, swinging the rats as he walked to his workbench by the wall. He turned on the lamp, set the rats in a heap, and took his skinning-knife from its scabbard high up on the tool rack. It flashed in the light as he tilted it back and forth, inspecting. "Come here," he said. "I'll show you how it's done."

He sat down on the floor by his father's chair. His father raised the lamp a bit and turned in his chair so the boy could see him clearly. The boy ran his hand over the rats: long guard hairs on the outside, softer fur underneath, their webbed hind feet disproportionately large. He thought of the rabbit.

Clamping a rat belly-up between his knees, his dad took the tail in his left hand, cut into the tip, then drew the knife down the length of the tail, dividing, and, when he came to the fur, cut back from the tail and out to the tips of the feet, then began working his way to the head, pulling the fur away from the meat as a line of blood oozed out at the anus. Painstakingly he cut away the thin underlayer

of skin that divided the pelt from the carcass. From time to time he pulled back the fur, unveiling a map. Near the base of the tail were convoluted sacks threaded with vessels. His father looked at him, smiling.

"Those are the musk-sacks," he said.

"What are they for?"

"They attract other rats."

His father squinted, cutting higher.

The boy crossed his legs, watching his father peel the soft brown fur from the carcass. When the whole thing had come off, his father looked down at him again. On the beam were a rack of wire stretchers. He took one down and drew the pelt over the wires, with the whiskers and holes at the point; then, to tighten, he tied the two halves of the tail around the base and pulled the pelt as taut as he could. he looked hard at his son, rubbing his hands together to clean them. "One down," he said. Immediately he began on a second rat.

Grandmother had come to join them. It was arranged. She was to show that she acknowledged the value of trapping; that she accepted it; that a line had to be drawn between the storybook beasts and the actual rats in the creek.

She had just finished dinner.

"There's a chair by the workbench, mother."

She sat down, not paying attention to what he was doing. The boy felt uncomfortable, confused, for he knew how she felt. She and his father started talking back and forth "over his head."

"That's quite a catch you have."

"It should bring good money, the pelts are good. Remember the trapping in Newfoundland? Dad . . ."

But she stiffened at the mention of her husband. She drew a deep breath.

"Yes, yes, your father was a good trapper."

He sat on the floor between them, the only sound the scrape of the knife, air heady with musk.

Finally she asked:

"Will Andrew or Frank be coming to dinner again this weekend?"

His father laughed.

"You'd have to ask Meg. Christ! When were they here."

last? Less than a month ago! We're running a restaurant it seems."

Her face went stony.

"I don't like them."

He answered absently, occupied with what he was doing.

"Can't say I'm crazy about them myself."

Her voice stabbed out.

"They're antisemites."

He didn't answer. The boy looked up.

"What's 'antisemite'?"

It seemed unlikely his father would know, and she didn't say. Her eyes seemed glazed and far away. It wasn't till later that he would learn of her year and a half as a federal clerk; it had been well after the birth of his father: a temporary separation; neither the Anglican Church nor her family favoured divorce, and yet her husband wouldn't stop drinking: he'd been an outport man whom she'd met on a summer holiday. That was just after she'd graduated—there'd been advertisements for teachers in Newfoundland. She could have taught elsewhere—close to her home in Ottawa—but she'd been curious. And in her first year she had met him. Passion at first, until the differences became too much to bear. Her dad, a Liberal cabinet minister with connections, had sent her to college as a girl and she was qualified both for clerical jobs and teaching: high school or primary; in her time she did all three. When she couldn't take marriage any more she'd come back to her parents. That was in 1937. The son was grown; she'd wanted out, she said—a life away from the island—and she had gotten it, up till 1939 when her husband had coaxed her home again. Though her work in Ottawa had been merely clerical, she hadn't typed her work in a mindless way; she'd studied much that she typed. And that had been 1938, in the Department, or, rather, "Branch" of Immigration; 1938, when the cold, official government prose had ended the lives of so many Jews in Europe. Politically callow, she'd merely been angry at the time, but, after the war, when she learned the details of the camps, it hurt her deeply; filled her with shame.

She looked at her son. He had worshipped his father; she'd had no influence on either. Her parents were gone, her position too. He turned to the boy.

"This is how it's done. I thought you should see. It'll take quite a time to skin them all."

That meant he could go. But he watched, absorbed, until the second pelt came off inside-out, and the muskrat that before had seemed frozen in terror was transformed into purple meat. "It's changed," he said, but his dad didn't answer.

Out of the blue his grandmother muttered, "We should never have joined the mainland."

His father watched her.

"Are you cold, mom?"

"A little cold."

"Will you take her upstairs, son."

He led her away, though she was quite capable of taking two stairs at a time. They stepped through the darkness. Far below, in the ring of light, he could see his stubble-bearded father skinning and scraping, the hair jet-black, but the stubble silver in the light, shining like blades, like tiny spears.

The boy thought hard until he balanced the two perspectives: his grandmother's tenderness and his father's practical sense. But he felt little love. If his dad had been hard all the time, or soft all the time, the boy might have learned to love him with his conscious mind instead of just his guts. But he was changeable, unpredictable. Once the school held a science fair. To help with the project the father took six eggs from under one of the brooding ducks and let the boy hatch them out in an incubator-contraption he had made. The boy was fanatical at the project, careful to sprinkle the shells each day and keep the temperature exact. He virtually lived at the glass box. When the ducklings came bursting out of their shells, the boy breathed heavily over the bulbs, inhaling the birth-smell. They rigged up a hot-room—his mother and he—and kept them under the cellar stairs. He was well over seven then. At first the father approved, but later complained about the hydro. Then, when the ducks were full-grown, he killed them for Sunday dinners; it was impractical to keep livestock merely for pets—that's what he had thought, though *he* was the one who had given the ducks to the youngster in the first place: "They're yours," he had said. "It

will be good for you, looking after them—teach you responsibility.” The boy was shattered with disappointment, disillusion. As for his grandmother, she only scoffed at the “moral lesson”; her son’s “practicality,” learned from his father, who to his misfortune had been unable to match her mind, never extended to what she considered the truly practical: “self-betterment” as she called it, “advancement through education.”

After that, the boy took the *muskrats*’ side; continued to sleep with the rabbit; allied himself with grandmother, every night overhearing her read. He pressed her for information about the great whale on her wall. She was an amateur naturalist: fat, but with slender, able legs. When he was nine and ten he lived for the times they went to the creek together. One of her favourite things was watching the herons and shorebirds stilt their way down Cashman’s Creek and, on hot afternoons, she studied the plankton creatures that lived in the ponds. For years he remembered. She’d comb for hours, collecting specimens in her jamjars. He’d learned the names and she had praised him: “a phenomenal memory,” she’d said. She hoped that he might become a biologist or a veterinarian. But his interest was merely a “phase,” a shallow thing; he went to the ponds because he was lonely and she seemed to be closer there.

The spring that he turned nine years old they went every Saturday morning. Her skirt would whip in a comic way as she strode to the stairs and marched out over the lawn. Then once they were on the road they’d slow down. Everything caught her eye:

“That’s a fox sparrow,” she would say, directing his eyes, “see how big it is? We don’t have any sparrows like *that* in the garden.”

A few paces farther she’d stop to exclaim at the “other-worldliness” of the posts and wires. The hydro trestles straddled the narrow valley.

He remembered it. One Saturday in particular he remembered all his life. They had started early, very early, but, what with their constant stopping, it had taken them over an hour to reach the creek. When they came to the bridge the sun was high. They slid down the roadside embankment, leaping over the gurgling ditch that was loud now with runoff from the hillside. She took off her sandals and hitched her dress and

they picked their way through a cat-tail bog, emerging on short level grass that bordered the pond. A great distance ahead was grass, then water, then grass, in a tundra pattern, between the banked-up road and thicketed ridge. The ridge led up to a forest. It was overgrown with crabapple trees and a flock of redwinged blackbirds nested in it.

"They don't like us here," he said, looking up where one hovered and *clicked*.

"Touchy, aren't they? Look down here. No, *here!* Right at your feet."

Standing ankle-deep in the pond he focused on the four or five inches of water, clear as air on the level silt. As he gazed down, it seemed slowly to expand, revealing animals.

"Those are water-fleas," she announced.

"Look at the red thing! There! That little red dot!"

It was hardly the size of a pinhead but he could make out the thrashing legs. It swam like a planet—swollen with blood according to her—but disappeared when he reached. The whole surface was punctured by arrowheads, patched with duckweed and moss.

"Come on. Let's wade in deeper."

As they felt their way, thick clouds of silt streamed up between their toes. He liked the tickling sensation, the uncertainty in his stomach, like the darkness at night when she shut off his bedroom light. She put out her hand and stopped him where a cloud of tadpoles swarmed, dipped her jar quickly and emptied it into his hands.

"Those are baby toads, not baby frogs!"

The tails thrashed over his palm. In the pond the others settled down, hung by their mouths from the pickerelweeds—she swished the water, stirring them up as she chattered. Then she went deeper, above his knees, leaving him to prowling by himself. When he swivelled his head the shore seemed a long way off; he was startled they'd come so far. The sun spangled the thick green moss, dazzling him as he stepped for the ridge, sometimes sinking up to his knees. A redwinged blackbird *stuka'd*.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

She was far away, small in the water.

"I'm going to find their nests!"

"Okay. But keep your eye on *that* one!"

She combed the pond the same way she combed her notebooks. The boy felt better, away from the house, for there had been fights about his father's foreign boss at the garage. His dad didn't like him. She'd grown distressed, and then his father had grown upset. "I know your principles, mom, but, for Christ's sake, can't I have free speech in my own house?" "If he's overbearing, blame *him*, don't blame his race!" "They're *all* overbearing!" As whenever she thought she smelt a hint of injustice, she lost control. Soon she was nagging. "Where did you *learn* such trash? Not from me!" It was a rare moment, for he flared back. "I know what you're thinking. All black or white, that's it with you. Well I've a right to my opinions; *I'm* the one who has to work there. Don't look at me that way! I don't wish harm to anyone. But, dammit all, I can dislike who I dislike!"

"Dislike or hate?"

"Oh Christ almighty."

His dad had tried to drop it but his wife stood up for him. So she fought with the wife. Last week they'd been up two nights in a row. His grandma had fat arms and she pounded the walls when angry; sometimes the tremors jiggled his bed. But, after the first fight, his father apologized, slept through it all, or just wouldn't answer.

It was precisely this silence of his that set her off. The boy always prayed that he'd say something to calm her down, some further thing, but he'd run out of words. Some nights his mother, usually calm, and tolerably fond of the old lady, grew self-righteous. Her voice sounded queer when she was mad—high-pitched and whiny: "You mind your own business! This is *our* home—not Newfoundland, not your high school." High school. The boy thought of a school way up in the sky.

The thorns and stones hurt his bare feet as he climbed out of the water and picked his way through the crabapple scrub, the branches needling his eyes. Soon he was totally shadowed by leaves. He couldn't believe his luck when he looked up to see a blackbird's nest within reach. He jumped, yanking the branches, then struggled to hold them down, craned over the edge and glimpsed the eggs: two cracked

into crooked grins. He spread one grin with his fingers. A heart blinked in the opening lid. Then the blackbird caught his head. He worked back to the pond.

She was waiting.

"Did he hurt you?"

The bird still hovered and scolded.

"Yeah, it hurts... But I saw the eggs!"

She checked his head.

"How many?"

"Six! Two opening up!"

"Here's something else."

It embarrassed him that he was squeamish at holding these catches of hers in his hands.

"A newt," she said.

"Newt."

His lips went round and thin to say it. Pink-skinned and lizard-shaped, blind, with tiny truncated legs: inscrutable, odd-feeling thing.

"Put it back in the jar," she laughed. "Carefully now or you'll kill it."

She took the jar and submerged it while he crouched to study the pulsing throat, the rest of the body thin, drifting like leaves. She tilted the glass and it darted straight out into weeds. Newt. A half-made thing. He strained to follow its thrashing while she hitched her skirt again. She was remarkably built: all belly, propped on long varicose legs. Though she puffed a lot, she was quite lithe and he would never understand how she could get around so well in that fat body.

"I must get some slacks, or some shorts!" she grumbled.

"And *you*—you need some wearable boots."

But he just stared at the water, wishing the newt would come back.

"It was fast."

"Come on. I haven't got what I came for."

He followed her slowly, wondering what she'd find, expecting anything. Now all across the pond the moss was blazing in the high sun. When he looked close he could see the snails push their horns up the lily-stems. She put one in his hand and he felt the shell jerk over his palm, the foot expanding, contracting; the moss stretched out on every side and dragonflies hung suspended in heat so thick that the surface shimmered with vapour, bubbles by thousands bursting

in moss while the light turned the sky to bone, baking the valley.

"Are you getting tired?" he asked.

The sweat poured down the side of her face.

"Not tired, just hot."

"You should go home."

"When we get what we're after," she said.

"What?"

"A dragonfly nymph. We'll catch one and watch it mature in the jar. You know what they look like. You remember it from the book." He didn't remember. "Come on, you help. . . . You have such eyes, not like your father's—such a keen eye, such a flair for observation."

He swelled with pride. Yes. He was better than his father. She *made* it so. And he must live up to her conviction, must watch as zealously as she did. He scoured the pond.

As they kept on combing the mud and the weeds, his eyes grew gradually disengaged, the sun illumining striders, stones, the snails on their wavering stems. The pond seemed very deep now, though it didn't come to his knees. In the middle water a thin fish hung suspended, lurking for flies, while flatworms and nymphs dragged their abdomens over the bottom.

They combed until mid-afternoon.

"Are you tired yet?"

This time it was she who asked him. But he just watched and waded, stalking the weedbeds, grabbing things and throwing them back, hypnotized by the pond.

"Hey!"

He blinked at her, waking up. Where she dripped in the sun he could see the bosses of skin that ran out from each side of her smile, her long white hair, and her soaking cotton skirt, hitched up to her crotch. Her thighs didn't meet. His fat legs rubbed together, but hers were two thin poles, as if she were made for wading in deep water.

"Do we *have* to go home?"

"I'm bushed," she puffed.

"Did you get the . . . the thing we were after?"

She showed him what she had in the jar—slipped a stick

in behind the head, it shot out its jaw, then stared like something from Mars and dropped to the bottom. "There's an interesting cycle here. We'll take it home and compare the diagram in the book." "Neat," he said, but all he thought was: how would it feel to be with it there in the jar?

"Come on. Your mom'll be angry."

He followed her out.

At the edge of the pond two redwinged blackbirds rose, then dove together, caught the very peak of his head, rose back into the sun, then caught him again, black planes; he sank to the water, sun blazing up off the moss, his head like a cracking egg, the heat making everything shake. He could hear the rush of the air in their wings as they circled and screamed; he hadn't noticed before the length of their screams, nor their terror of him. A frog beside him hunched down into the weeds, throat working in fear, as they swooped and swerved for another run. Everything seemed to be rising. Above him he saw a heron's legs bend at the knee and jump out of the water, the four-pronged feet trailing moss and scum; he heard the swirl and slap of the wings and the sound of the beak tearing blackbirds' heads. The feet came down, knees braced for a second jump—but there was no second jump. No need for one. The water all went black. . . .

The first thing he saw when he woke was the empty overturned jar in the gully. She pressed cloths to his forehead.

"How do you feel?"

He held his stomach. She frowned. Huge creases around her eyes.

"We stayed too long in the sun. I should have known better."

Then she took his hand.

"You'll be all right now. Stand up."

His legs wobbled. They walked to the creek where it was cool. High up on the bridge the gravel-trucks went over the boards—*ka-plump, ka-plump*. The water-striders scurried.

She looked down at him.

"Just sit for a while."

He dropped to his seat, seeing spots of light, though it was dark, so dark that she seemed to be fading away from him. He watched her wade out with the jar.

"The water will cool us, then we'll go home. But you mustn't drink too much."

"No, gramma. You'll never guess what I saw! Gramma? Gramma! You know what I saw?"

A gravel-truck shook stones out over the water, making the striders race. She looked back at him from her stilts and smiled.

"No. Tell me."

He looked at the whale on her wall. Though there were six harpoons in its back it seemed to be winning, dragging the boats off, dashing the hunters with its tail. "Did it get away?" He asked the question as if she'd been there. When she was pressed, she went through a long Melvillean story, frame by frame, so that, as he looked at the wall, he could see the whale dispatch the rest of the boats and sound to safety. Her voice made the picture on the wall move like a cinema. But there was something in her account—a plaintiveness, a hesitation—that, like a cinema, made the whole thing strange, unreal, and, at the end, when the picture went still, he was left with precisely what he had had when she'd begun: the men in pursuit, the whale with its tail upreared for a blow, the rest . . . uncertain.

"Was that how it *really* was?"

She tried to change the subject. Not till much later would he guess she had been remembering Williamsport factory: how the inflated Blues had come in, eighty feet long, buoyed up with air-pumps, their bellies bloated out like tuxedo-fronts, tongues lolling, jaws knocking in sickly smiles—how they had come bobbing, towed in the wake of the tug-like catchers. And, in the factory itself, her husband had died when a cable had lurched a shackle-bolt out of the floor into his face. The men hadn't wanted to bring her her husband but, at the church, she had asked the pastor to open the lid. The skull was cracked. In the years that followed she kept on teaching but, after retirement, she had grown vague. She'd missed him badly; given the chance, she would never have married him again, but it had been done, and, once he was taken away, the narrowness, even the temper, were things that she dwelt on: sadly at first, then almost fondly. Sometimes she even saw faults of her own.

That was Newfoundland. Now, in her sixties, she was here with her son in Ontario, her daughter-in-law, and the boy. Support. It was better now. But still she lived in a world of her own.

As the years went by he lost his interest in her biology and her tales, but still her differentness intrigued him. There were still occasional fights at table with the "daughter" or, some weekends, one of the bachelor sons-in-law. She didn't see eye-to-eye with the family on anything: Canada, Israel, Nasser, the war. Just after the Suez crisis—in 1957—came an especially bad night: his Uncle Andrew had held forth for half an hour or so on Suez, while the boy, fourteen, and the grandmother strained to keep still.

Andrew was beetish: beet-red face, beet-round: a whining edge to his talk. It took him all evening to finish his meal, he talked so much. His pate was shiny, reddish pink, and each time he made a point he held a piece of potato up to the light.

"We lost *enough* young men in Korea. . . . Peace-keeping force! . . . Risking young lives!" "Prestige for Canada," ventured Frank. Andrew sneered at his blank-faced brother. "Damned politicians!"

The boy hunched silently at his plate. Across the table, grandma was holding her peace as well. His buttocks ached on the hard chair that his uncle's speech was making harder by the minute. Where was Korea? He wanted to leave but hadn't finished his vegetables. He hated peas but, when company came, they always had them. He was gagging the last of them down between mouthfuls of milk while his father, lost in his own train of thought, droned his way down his separate track, ignoring Andrew.

"If we could drain that south pasture pond. . . . The bloody cows are always down there, knee-deep in mud. I keep digging ditches to the creek but by April or May it's all pond again. I need more men. The VLA did me no favour giving me *this* place. Useless land!"

The boy finished his peas: fourteen years old; too old, he thought, to be made to eat what he didn't like.

"May I be excused?"

His mother smiled.

"Don't you want dessert?"

"I don't know. What is it?"

Uncle Frank rumbled.

"What a question—Christ! 'What is it?' Meg, I think you must be spoiling the little bugger."

And his voice trailed off in a horselaugh.

"Mind your own damned business, Frank!"

Uncle Andrew continued his speech as if no one else had said anything, while, at the head of the table, his father rattled on.

"I can't figure it... why a cow would want to go down there in the first place... Keep trying to fence them in on the good land." He glared at the boy. "*He* leaves the gate open, of course..." He sighed to himself. "And then they're away... Down to the pond like wandering Jews."

Like a spark the word ignited the uncle.

"That's what started it all in the first place," muttered Andrew, "back in October." He paused and his mouth curled into a sneer. "The goddam Jews."

The boy heard a shuffling under the table. When he looked up his grandmother's face had turned deep red. He silently prayed for his uncle to stop. But he went on. In minutes the grandmother looked sick.

"Those cows..." continued his father.

She brought her fist down on the table.

"Cows!" she exclaimed.

Everyone turned. She was watching her son.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you hear what this ass is saying? Such blatant prejudice... and especially now, when we've seen what the Germans did to them in Belsen, Auschwitz, Dachau." She turned to Andrew. "I can't believe you can be so stupid, so totally blind! The Jews have suffered so—from precisely your kind of prejudice and stupidity." She looked at the father. "Can't you make this fool shut up? And in front of the boy!"

"Yes," soothed the mother, patronizing, "You know it disturbs her. How many times..."

Andrew started to interject, "Mackenzie King," but the grandmother cut him off.

"PRECISELY such prejudice, and from none other than your beloved MACKENZIE KING!"

She spat the words. Uncle Frank looked blank. As if for his own information, he asked: "What was wrong with King?"

Her face went livid. Andrew waffled, shifting his ground.

"I dunno that King was so bad." But his manner had turned uncertain, apologetic; he played with his napkin and looked about.

"I guess they suffered all right. But what about our own?"

She thrust herself up; at the same time shouted so loud that the uncle turned his face as if recoiling from a blow.

"Ignoramus! Bigot! They are the chosen people of God. The CHOSEN PEOPLE!"

And then she was gone down the side-door steps. The father jumped, angrily glaring before he pursued her.

"You're always talking, aren't you, Andy! Always the thinker! See what you've done?"

The boy spilled milk across the table but no one moved. Out on the lawn he could hear his father trying to soothe her. He ran down the steps and out through the door. By the time he could see, she was calm and quiet, patting his father on the back, as one would a dog.

"Don't trouble yourself. Go back to your *guests*. . . . No no. . . . No no. . . . I'm perfectly fine. . . . Just let me walk a while. . . ." Her lips made a faint smile. "Maybe I'll check on those *cows* of yours—down at the *pond*."

Her voice brimmed with sarcasm and contempt, but all that concerned his dad was her health. Her contempt meant little. Reassured, he turned away. The boy ran up. "Can I go with her?" "Yeah, go on." He banged the back door. As the boy and his grandma retreated across the yard they could hear all hell break loose at the table: the father and brother-in-law in a row. . . .

This time they went to the pond by the back way: over good land, the upper pasture. She walked at a slow and even pace, but the boy kept running off and rejoining her, like a dog trailing its master.

"How about the poles, grandma? The poles? Would you like to do some fishing?"

"Why not," she said, as if he'd suggested a stiff drink—and he was off to get the two poles from the toolshed, along with the can: he would dig for worms when they reached the pond. . . .

There was nothing to notice when they got there: a croaking field of shallow water. The gate was closed so there were no cows: just redwinged blackbirds *clicking* and fussing among the crabapple scrub that covered the long, steep hill. They turned for the creek, a hundred yards or so from the pond. Cashman's Creek it was called, from the man who had sold the land to the government: the federal government which, in turn, had handed it back through the Veteran's Land Act to his father. Cashman's Creek was rich in muskrats. Sometimes his father said he made more money trapping in the creek than raising cattle or working in town at the garage.

The boy watched his grandmother as she walked. She had grown even fatter over the years and she puffed much more now; her long white hair hung down her back. He stayed behind, picking out wrigglers from the rich soil by the pond, then scurried after, solicitous: "Sit here," he said when he had caught up and they'd come to an opening in the willows and wild grape that lined the water.

She sat down and said nothing. It wasn't like her to be still. But the outburst had drained her; she seemed to be locked away in some burrow in her mind. He baited her hook and cast it in, then cast his own. The sun was low but it illuminated the apple tree on the other side of the creek and, when it descended far enough to glare directly into his eyes between two boughs, he closed his lids and imagined swimmers in the water: girls from his high school class; he conjured an orgy of fucking and, when he parted his lids, the sun was like a huge gold bird in the boughs.

"Baltimore oriole," she muttered.

"What?"

He looked at her. It hurt him that she had been crying. She turned away. He looked back at the tree across the creek.

"There's no oriole, gramma."

"Yes. It's there. Between the boughs."

Her voice said more; it said the words in a way that could have meant many things: that the sun was a bird; that the sun had come down to perch in the boughs; or maybe only that she was sick and tired of fighting and that it didn't make any difference whether she saw the sun or a Baltimore oriole. All her life she had been so precise at identification. She worried him. This depression was new. . . . If he could arouse her, get her interest, get her talking. But what to talk about when his mind was full of school?

She sat and moped. Many years later he would imagine her seeing bodies—flesh and bone piled into pits—newsreels of Germans made to look, American soldiers, Eisenhower—all with handkerchiefs over their noses because of the stench.

He tried to remember the start of the quarrel. "The goddam Jews." That had been it, as so often before. But who were the Jews? When they'd studied the Bible there had been tribes, the twelve tribes of Israel. He couldn't remember the names of the tribes and didn't ask. He tried to cheer her, idly chattering:

"There are Indians buried somewhere on this land. I've been to the Six Nations Reserve. . . . I know the names of the six nations, the Iroquois tribes."

He started listing them out loud; when he was younger the very sounds of the words had moved him: "Tescarora, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga, Mohawk, and . . ." what was the other tribe? He was going to ask when she put her finger to her lips. The light was fading. Old face. Too old. The wrinkled eyes. She looked at the creek, directing his gaze.

"What is it?"

"Sssh."

Jesus! he thought. She was making him scared. A couple of herons stalking the water in evening light—that's all he saw—no, not a couple—he looked again; there was a line of them going by. But she'd seen them before. These, too, had moved him once, like the Indians. But he had been small then. And in her anger why should she sit so still to watch a few thin herons?

He whispered and nudged her toward the bushes. "Better in here. A perfect blind." They had drawn close now. He could make out the crests, the forked prongs of the toes when they lifted their feet. Many minutes passed and the birds stayed still, waiting for prey, then grew impatient, stilted on. But other herons followed after. It was damp. He wanted to rouse her to get her home. What had she been saying? Oh yes: the Baltimore oriole. He whispered, softly. "We should be getting back to the house. Tell me more about the whale. Tell me the story. Grandma? Grandma! It's getting cold. My dad'll be mad at me. Gramma!"

"Hm?"

"Which of your books do you like the best?"

He didn't care. He had been interested when he was smaller, not any more. Now he had other things to swell him. He only asked to get her attention.

Maybe she knew that. She never answered, but, when he thought of it later on, he imagined *Ezekiel* coming alive inside her mind: the dry bones rising, joining to walk. Perhaps that wasn't what she had thought but, in the evening light, it seemed to him that the herons with their bone legs and their bone beaks were like skeletons walking the water. He'd never seen them that way before. There weren't that many, maybe ten, many more than usual—since they were solitary birds away from the rookery—and yet in her mind—many years later he would remember and ask: how many had there been in his grandmother's mind? Millions perhaps. Had she envisioned them coming up out of the land, despite the government that had turned their ship away to certain death: the cruel and arrogant men like King and Blair and Massey and Lapointe who'd turned them back? A lifetime later, when he thought of the herons passing, he thought of the bones of all the tribes—Onondaga, Judah, Palestinian, Karamojong—walking together in muddy water, in the swamps and cedars and pines of Cashman's Creek, of the new land. . . .

A lifetime later. A lifetime later. . . . The night he learned about her death it was early winter. He lay in his bed and tried to imagine her great body under its sheet in the hospital bed. Outside, the wind was very strong and rain roared over the roof as if he were under gigantic currents that flowed far beneath the sea. He imagined her entering the ocean, turning weightless on the cushion of deep water. She swam very fast, and soon there were herds of bodies surrounding her, huge and fat and totally weightless, like her own. He cupped his hands to his face, imagining how it might be. As the rain poured down he thought to himself and seemed to hear her reading faintly on the other side of the wall, the words distinct: "One grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air." The rain roared down. He closed his eyes and saw her sounding.