FROM CHAPTER ONE

1) I stayed in the bathroom, I suppose, for twenty minutes or so, possibly more. For me, that wasn't long, and so the length of my visit was unlikely to draw attention, at least from my parents or sisters, since they were familiar with my unusual patterns of behavior.

In truth, due to my having slipped away from the table—so I believed—without being noticed, I imagine now that during my time upstairs I was in the thoughts of no one at all: not of those just a few feet away, under the floor below my feet, nor of any others who might have been far away indeed, beyond the horizon, in Africa, the Philippines, China, or any distant reach of the planet.

The nearest included not only those still at the table downstairs, but any who might have gone into the living room—my sisters Hannah and Ingie, for example, who by this time had likely excused themselves and were sitting on one of the scatter rugs in the living room (Ingie Indian fashion, Hannah, more demurely, with her legs to the side, one arm supporting her weight), playing pick-up sticks, Chinese checkers, or Authors. And the nearest also included those who might have gone into other rooms—Lutie, for example, who, with my mother and my aunt Signe, may have gotten up to carry cups and dessert plates through the swinging door to leave them on the ribbed drainboard of the sink, where, very easily, it seemed to me that I could not only imagine but also actually see them.

2) As I said, I have no memory of passing through the back hall or coming up the stairs. I have no memory, either, of later getting up from the toilet, leaving the bathroom, or going back downstairs. This second blank space in memory sometimes has the strange effect of causing me to imagine that I am in fact still there, still upstairs, on the toilet, beside the dormer window, as if, after sixty years, I had never left that spot, not even though the house itself and everything around it are now gone.

3) The origin of the bathroom seemed a miracle and mystery to me after my experience in it, and it seems only the more so now. This is true especially when I think back to the room's distinctiveness in harmony, balance, and proportion, and back to the resultant and commensurate pleasures brought into being by those qualities. How could such a room, in the first place, ever have come into existence? How could it have been conceived, then subsequently brought about physically? How, above all, could the great number of necessary, varied, timely, and complex impulses, motives, and actions toward that end have been brought into so perfect a convergence, as they obviously had been, to bring such a room into existence at just such a time, in the autumn of 1921, that distant, single, particular year whose very sound is now both hopelessly antique and dizzyingly modern?

4) (Two pipes came up through the floor and disappeared under the curled rim of the tub, presumably connecting there with the tub's thick white ceramic faucets.

Downstairs, on the wall behind the kitchen sink, there had been three pipes. Where, now, was the third one, and what had its purpose been?)

5) I was never again to visit the upstairs of Marie and Lutie's house, a fact that may help explain the occasion's having proved as memorable as it did. Of the things that happened afterward, I don't know how many were direct results of my visit. But I do know, with an unqualified certainty, this much: that on my visit upstairs I received the first sustained and lucid premonition, however I may or may not have understood it at the time, that, through no choice of my own, I was one of those destined to scrutinize and ponder, for the remainder of my life, the mysteries of space and time.

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In that now-unexistent little room, that is, where I had never been before and was never to be again, I felt, for a handful of minutes, and simultaneously, these things: 1) that I was suspended inside time itself as if in an enormous, warm, embracing sea; and 2) that I was situated perfectly, for those same few moments, at the very center of all things.

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(As had happened once before in my life, my consciousness grew first in a vertical direction, bringing with it a heightened awareness of what was below me. It then changed direction and expanded horizontally, in the manner of waves moving outward on a pond. It brought with it, in this second way, a heightened consciousness of things around me and at varying distances away.

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The immediate effect of the vertical form of development was to make me aware of the rooms below with such a degree of vividness that I actually saw them, although not always in complete form. For a moment, for example, I saw Lutie's hands (sleeves pushed to her elbows) as she held a china plate under running water. For another moment, I saw not Lutie's hands but Marie's as she placed a new stack of dishes on the drainboard (her sleeves were cuffed neatly at the wrists). I saw the kitchen door swinging, then slowing to a stop. In the living room, I saw Hannah and Ingie playing pick-up sticks on an oval braided scatter rug. Both of them were now leaning sideways, their weight on one elbow.

Mainly, however, I saw things directly below, in the dining room. I saw Marie and Lutie returning to the table; a fresh pot of coffee being poured into cups; the curtains at the windows blowing briefly inward, like pale hands reaching toward the table, then emptying out again and falling limp.

My grandmother, in her wheelchair, sat at the far end of the table, with her back to the windows. At her left was Hannah's place, empty now since she had gone into the living room with Ingie. To the left of Hannah's chair sat my aunt Klara, the wife of my great-uncle Edgar. To Klara's left was Marcus, followed by my own chair (it was one of the three yellow straight chairs that had been brought in from the kitchen). On what had been my own left was my aunt Signe, and next to her my father. Then came Marie herself, directly across the table from my grandmother, her back toward the arched doorway into the living room. To Marie's left was my great-uncle Edgar; then my aunt Nora; after her, Lutie (who sat nearest the kitchen door); then Ingie's empty chair; and at last my mother, in her usual place at my grandmother's right.

Seeing the table from above in this way provided an unusual perspective, so that I saw people's arms extend outward as they picked up their coffee cups and then drew them toward their lips. My father, with a cigarette between his first two fingers (his only cigarette since the one he stubbed out on the sidewalk), moved his hand also from an ashtray to his lips. Now and then (he sat forward on his chair, his elbows resting on the tablecloth), he turned his head toward the ceiling in order to exhale smoke away from the others at the table. (When he did this, it was almost as if he were secretly glancing up at me.)

The oddity of these movements, along with other arresting details—my mother's large blue earrings, for example, and her yellow summer dress; the billowing of the curtains; my aunt Signe and my grandmother relaying something to one another across the table, moving their lips but using no words; my uncle Edgar leaning back, clasping his hands across his buttoned vest, then with a mischievous expression saying something in Latin; Lutie at that same moment reaching out with a faintly trembling hand to move a small vase (it held a single red peony) an inch to the left on the white cloth—all of these details, along with the general impression of the room and the scene, seized my attention powerfully and yet proved able to hold it for only a short time, the reason being that the horizontal growth of my consciousness arose unexpectedly at almost the same moment and began at once to intensify rapidly.

The sudden and powerful sideways expansion of my consciousness, as I've suggested, was to provide the true climax of my trip to the bathroom. I now believe, in fact, even though such an experience had occurred once before in my life, that this one constituted the earliest altogether synthesizing moment in my embryonic intellectual life, the first moment of its kind that gave me—as it was taking place instead of later—an awareness, faint as it may have been, of the magnitude and significance of what was happening to me.

There should be little surprise, therefore, that I found myself gripped more firmly by this new consciousness than I had been by my vertical one. And there should be little that seems unusual in the three-step movement of the powerful energy that was involved. First, somewhat like an anchor being weighed, this energy drew my attention upward from the rooms below. Then it consolidated and compressed itself, for a brief time, entirely within myself. And finally, making its exit from me, it moved outward in all directions in its widening circumferent journey.

It is agreed universally that nothing can be set into motion except through a stimulus separate from itself. Therefore, I have studied assiduously, searching back carefully into these memories in an effort to find the one energizing power that most probably triggered this episode of consciousness. And that catalyst, I'm now all but certain, was the glimpse I'd had, as I came to the top of the stairs, of Marie and Lutie's bedroom.

Directly in front of me, as I said, before I entered the bathroom, stood the open door to my great-aunts' room. And, clearly, the memory of what I saw through that door remained with me as I sat gazing up at the wallpaper on the underside of the slanted bathroom ceiling; at the open window to my right; and at the white chair standing nearby, with the towel folded over its back.

Before I went into the bathroom, it had never occurred to me in even the most faintly conceivable way that any part of Marie and Lutie's lives might have had to do with sleep. Before I reached the top of the stairs and saw the bedroom door, I had never once given

thought to my great-aunts' experience of nighttime or to the phenomenon of their sleeping through it. Never had I thought of them as growing tired in such a way as to require sleep—or even as being, for that matter, associated in any way whatsoever with the homely, commonplace, intimate act of sleeping itself, with preparations for it, the appurtenances of it, participation in it, or risings from it.

Now, however, my glimpse into their bedroom had changed everything and had already begun to create a consciousness that was destined to influence, alter, and change the very path of the life that stretched out before me.

What I'd seen through the door, in short, had had for me a vividness sufficiently intense that, even when was I no longer looking at it directly, it stayed in my consciousness with the clarity not only of something remembered but of something physically still there. The intensity of the impression, in other words, gave me a consciousness, as I sat on the toilet, not only of the memory but of the yet-concrete presence of my great-aunts' room. And this degree of tangible physicality—the actuality, as it were, of the room's existence inside myself, and therefore of my self's existence inside the room—made tangible and real to me for the very first time in my life the following uncertainties:

1) the uncertainty of knowing where I was;
2) the corollary and attendant uncertainty of knowing where I was not;
3) the difficulty of knowing the difference between the two;
4) the difficulty of understanding why such a difference existed at all.

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(With the result that my sensitivity to the world around me, and to the relationship among its parts, changed suddenly, was enhanced, and grew.

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A transformation of such a kind as this couldn't, of course, have been brought into existence by chance alone, and yet I can't help acknowledging the part that chance must have played. Unquestionably, such a transformation depended, first, on the simultaneous existence of three forces, each holding a personal significance to me; second, on the coincidence of each of the three forces, in and of itself, being situated in a certain, strategic way; and, finally, on the coincidence of each being situated also in a particular and strategic way in relation to the other two.

The initial locations of these forces, as I've suggested, were:

1) The dining room
2) The bathroom
3) The bedroom

And, as I came to understand them later, the significance of each of the locations was as follows:

1) The significance of the dining room (through my vertical consciousness) lay in its containing (in the persons of those gathered there and in the ceremoniousness of what they did) evidence of the depth, longevity, and continuity of my family's biological origins as well as of their roots in a variety of historical and cultural traditions extending back to the early middle years of the nineteenth century. Earlier than that, the traces and lineages of their existence faded, grew dim, and disappeared from my view.

2) The significance of the bathroom (which I was conscious of neither vertically nor horizontally, but as a place unified, compact, secure, holistic, and both physically and aesthetically comforting) lay, first, in its evident perfections of light, air, design, and proportion; second, in its being a marvelously achieved and exactly preserved manifestation of the touch, feel, texture, and thought of the year 1921; and, last, in its being a transformative meeting place of the energies approaching me from the other two directions: from the dining room below, and from my great-aunts' bedroom upstairs, through the wall behind me and slightly to the left.

3) The significance of the bedroom (which I became conscious of as being actually inside myself, and myself inside it) lay in its providing me with an awareness for the first time in my life of the intimacy of sleep; of the many customs and habits associated with it; and, therefore and simultaneously, an awareness also of the formality, omnipresence, and inevitability of death.

FROM CHAPTER TWO

The house we lived in was built in 1908, although of course I knew this only long after we had left it.

Our side of the house was larger than our neighbors' and extended farther back than theirs, so that there was one place in the house where we had windows on both east and west. The narrow side room at the back that served as pantry and also as a passage from the dining room into the kitchen was where we had the one west window. Its walls were wainscoted with tongue-and-groove strips. Possibly they had been varnished once, but by the time we lived there, everything from the baseboard up was painted the same light yellow as the kitchen. It was here, looking through the kitchen door with the west window just behind me, that I saw my father lift Ingie up to the ceiling.

When we were outdoors, as I've mentioned, we spent most of our time in the side yard, or on the porch, or in the "front" yard, by which we meant that part of the lawn running along Fourth Street rather than Maple. I do remember going around the corner onto the other leg of the front yard, although rarely, since it was thought of as properly belonging to our neighbors.

An enormous elm stood near the porch steps on their side of the yard, a tree large enough that the very earth sloped up toward its trunk from a considerable distance all around. Because of the deep shade there, the grass on this side of the house was thinner and more fine than on our lawns. Our neighbors' side had actually once been the front of the house. Not only did they have a pair of large windows in their living room facing west onto the porch, and a stained-glass transom over their front door, but at the curb on Maple Street stood an old iron hitching post once intended for the convenience of visitors arriving by horse and buggy.

The hitching post was painted black and had a ring at its tip that I enjoyed lifting up in order to let it fall down again with a clink against one side of the iron post or the other. My first memory of my great aunts Marie and Lutie is from a summer afternoon when I was standing by the hitching post as they walked past on their way to visit my mother.
The grass underfoot was burned and dry. My father was still away, I'm certain. The feeling of great antiquity that lingers in the memory makes me place it in late July or early August of 1945.

Marie and Lutie approached from the north, walking on Maple Street from Third. In the memory I didn't become unaware of them until they were little more than ten or twelve arm-lengths away. I stood there looking at them. As always, they walked side by side. As always, they wore dresses of a thin dark material, open at the neck, belted loosely at the waist, the hems coming down halfway below their knees. As always, they walked in near-unison, with a hint of industry in their steps that fell just short of haste but had about it an air of something greater than ordinary determination. They walked with their heads bent forward slightly, as if they were engaged in a conversation with each other, although a

conversation in which neither of them was saying anything, but both instead were listening attentively.

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I have no other memory of Marie and Lutie ever being at our house on Fourth Street. I learned later, though, that during the war they made a point, every third or fourth week, of walking across town to call on my mother.

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By the time of this memory, Marie was already sixty-eight, Lutie already sixty-one. They stopped in front of me and bent down where I stood in the sunlight, on the dry grass, beside the hitching post that, I remember, felt warm from the sun when I touched it.

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I don't remember what they said, or how long they stood there, leaning with their large faces bent down toward mine. But I remember watching them walk away from me, in an image that I understand now was a glimpse through a hole in time.

Having thought back on it countless times, I suppose that a certain kind of perfected or ideal version of that moment may have emerged. But whether this is so or not, I swear that I am faithful to the concrete truth and detail of what I saw that afternoon.

I stood by the hitching post and watched them move away from me to the corner, make the left turn onto Fourth Street, then continue toward the walkway that would take them up onto the porch and then to the front door of our house.

In the memory, as their twin figures move away from me, there is no sound. The afternoon is quiet, the air warm, sunlight falling in leaf-shadow patterns on the cracked squares of the old sidewalk.

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Not until years later was I to understand what actually happened that moment or how profoundly it would shape and nurture the rest of my life: the fact that one summer afternoon when the world was on the edge of changing forever, my great-aunts passed by, side by side, in long dark dresses, their heads bent slightly forward, one of them—it was Lutie, I'm certain—carrying a cloth-covered basket on her arm.

I know now that at that moment they were not simply my two great-aunts, but a window for me to see through—with the result that, for a brief moment in the summer of 1945, when I was almost four years old, standing near the curb, on the grass, by the hitching post, I looked back through them into the nineteenth century, and was changed forever.

TWO PARTS FROM CHAPTER FOUR

FIRST:

In the years of my early adolescence, there existed innumerable things and places in West Tree that offered windows for me to see through, into the past. These included objects as varied, for example, as the wooden paving blocks that still remained in some parts of downtown, or the pitted iron railing (put there in 1854) along the crest of Old College Hill. The windows included, seemingly, almost everything—the smooth, dark flow of the river as it curled over the lip of the mill dam, or the way the breezes smelled when they came from the southwest in the sweet part of a warm autumn, or the sound of church bells on spring mornings, or the taste of root beer floats in Harry Bauchman's drug store, or the way sunlight looked when it flowed through thick leaves to splash brokenly on cracked sidewalks in July and August.

Simply to name all such places or things to see through, let alone describe them, would approach the impossible. But, even so, here is a list of some of the moments, things, and locations that I now think were in one way or another typical, and typically influential, in bringing me in my adolescent years toward an increasingly precise and complete understanding of the world as a creation of the past (and to an understanding, although not immediately, of the place I might expect to have in that world).

Being by its nature arbitrary and to some degree necessarily partial and selective, the list nevertheless offers a practical usefulness through its inclusion of:

1) My grandmother's house at 917 Woodland Avenue (similar if not almost identical in style to my great-aunt Marie and Lutie's house on Christiania Avenue)

2) The back yard of my grandmother's house, which extended deep into the center of the block, with trees, hedges, and swing; the part of the yard nearer to the house, most significantly with its picnic table and, at the northwest corner of the house and providing the driveway's terminus, its pitted concrete apron for a car to stand on

3) The basement of my grandmother's house, with, among others, these particulars: an extra toilet one corner, behind an improvised wooden wall; exposed ceiling beams made of two-by-eights, with smaller angled struts separating and bracing them; numerous vestiges of the lives of my father and his siblings in years long past, among these a bicycle without wheels, a rusty tire pump, three and a half pairs of skis, five bamboo ski poles, a croquet set with mallets, balls, sticks, and wickets, though the wickets were rusted, the colors of the wooden parts were faded, and the handles of three out of the six mallets were broken

4) The upstairs of my grandmother's house (similar to but considerably larger than the upstairs of Marie and Lutie's house), with its central hallway, its telephone and telephone table, sloping ceilings, and four bedrooms

5) Of these, my father's bedroom in particular, with its window facing north and its ceiling garret-like and slanted

6) Located a long block directly north of my grandmother's house, the West Tree Hospital and what I believe now to have been the significance both of that building and of its design

7) The park and esplanade reaching north from the rear of the hospital, toward Christiania Avenue

8) The wading pool and sprinkler located in that park, at the Christiania Avenue end

9) My visit to the wading pool in the summer of 1944, although it could conceivably have been 1945

10) The figure, personality, and influence of Dr. F. K. Kampfer, nearby neighbor of my grandmother, fellow church member, frequent visitor to her house, and professor, since 1928, of German and physics at Old College

11) The clothing worn by Dr. Kampfer, in particular the hat, soft brown jacket, high socks and baggy shorts that he commonly wore on his walks through West Tree

12) The scent that came from Dr. Kampfer's clothing: a scent composed of mothballs and the smoke of ancient campfires, these being mingled with a number of other and much fainter smells

13) The part these smells played at my grandmother's house one Saturday morning in early April 1954, when they caused me, for the first time in my life—through realizing that what I smelled in Dr. Kampfer's clothing were the scents of the past and therefore the scents of what no longer existed—to understand that by necessity the past exists and yet by an equal necessity can not and does not exist.

SECOND:

vii.

(I had nothing to do. The house was empty, hollow, dreary, vacant, abandoned.

Time didn't move. In the living room I looked up at the rows of books behind their glass doors flanking the fireplace. I went into the basement but soon

came back up again. In the dining room, I opened the door and climbed the carpeted stairway to the second floor. I stood in the hall near the telephone table and looked from one end of the house to the other. I went into each of the rooms and came out of them again, including my father's room and the storage room with the tent pegs and tennis rackets in it.

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My grandmother reads. She writes letters. The house is quiet and no one is in it. My grandmother sometimes listens to the radio. In her wheelchair at the dining room table she almost always does so. On Saturday mornings when I am there, the station from Old College broadcasts selections of music interspersed with periods of talk and discussion. I pay little attention to it. The sound of the radio seems to me dreary, vacant, and churchlike.

viii.

(Professor C. P. Kampfer most often came in through the front door. He would give the bell a quick double ring, open the door, put his head inside, then sing out the word "hello" in a way that was less interrogative than declarative. He sang the second syllable in three extended tones that I thought of as forming an undulating string of letter "o's" that came into the house, wending their way through doors and around corners into my grandmother's ear.

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If the weather was at all wet, snowy, or muddy, Professor Kampfer's ring would be more distant because he would come in at the back door instead of the front. He would step into the wood-paneled vestibule, take off his boots and leave them on the mat there, then come up the three steps, open the kitchen door and sing out his greeting. Invariably, as though imagining that he still had on wet boots, or muddy ones, he would tiptoe across the kitchen floor, appearing at the entry to the dining room with only thick wool stockings on his feet.

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My grandmother clearly seemed pleased at the attentions she received from Professor Kampfer. She received him eagerly, with smiles and an awkward, brief half-embrace, for which he leaned down to her. In spite of the fervor of these visits, I remember them as normally lasting little more than ten or fifteen minutes. This kind of brevity, however, was in keeping with one of Professor Kampfer's most pronounced traits, which was the impression he gave of being always in very great haste.

If my grandmother was in her bedroom, he would go in immediately and, after the embrace, draw up the small straight chair to the side of the bed. If she was in the dining room, he would sit at the table where my mother had sat, with his back toward the windows.

He brought items of food for my grandmother—breads, cakes, muffins that he had made himself, small jars of his own preserves from the raspberry bushes in his yard. With very nearly each visit, too, he would return reading materials that my

grandmother had given him, commenting without fail—whether or not the two went on to discuss the matter further—that what he'd read had been "very interesting." In turn, he often brought items for my grandmother to read. Sometimes these were books with certain chapters set off by markers. More often they were articles in popular magazines or in alumni or church newsletters. On the following Saturday's visit they would make their exchanges again.

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(From the beginning, I found Professor Kampfer a curiosity but at the same time faintly unsettling. There was a quality in his appearance—partly the result of his eyebrows, which were dark and bushy and seemed to be held up by tiny invisible hooks—that gave him a constant look of surprise.

In the time I knew him, I doubt that he and I spoke more than twenty words. I know, however, that I had more than twenty moments of uneasiness when, for no apparent reason, I would notice Professor Kampfer staring at me fixedly, as if I were a mystery in need of solving, or—thanks to his eyebrows again—as if I had just done something so alarming as to render him shocked and speechless.

I had no idea that Professor Kampfer was later to play so significant a role in my life. He, too, I'm sure, would have been just as surprised to know the same thing.

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The pleasure my grandmother took in his company must been due in some part simply to the length of their acquaintance. Professor Kampfer, after all, had lived around the corner (or through the block) on Poplar Street since 1928, the year he began teaching at Old College. This meant that my grandmother had known him and his family—a now-deceased wife and a son grown and gone—for over a quarter of a century.

My own curiosity about Professor Kampfer was less personal than my grandmother's but no more limited. Unquestionably, he was strange both in appearance and behavior. There were his startled eyebrows, his perpetual haste, his rapid speech, the bird-like quickness of his movements, and, most noticeable of all, his curiously asymmetrical mouth. Not only was its left side higher than the right, but a tic had chosen to make its home somewhere within that same left lip. Whenever the tic became active, the top lip jerked suddenly upward—as if tugged by another tiny hook—and exposed the long yellow canine residing behind it. The fleeting appearance of that tooth gave Professor Kampfer an oddly sinister look, as if a civilized face had been ever so briefly unmasked to reveal a glimpse of the unliterate carnivore behind it.

ix.

(I can't be absolutely certain which of the following is of the greatest significance, either in and of itself or in its relationship to the future:

1) the clothing worn by Professor Kampfer
2) the mingled smells that sometimes arose from Professor Kampfer's clothing

> 3) the fact that Professor Kampfer existed seemingly in a different plane of time from everyone else, since he continued to dwell within the Epoch of Walking when, for all others, that epoch had long since ended

The three, I do know, are of equal interest insofar as all concern themselves obviously with the mysteries of space and time.

x.

Like anyone else's, Professor Kampfer's clothing varied with the seasons. It differed from other people's, however, in being so clearly old-fashioned, as if he had received it from storage in some previous era.

Whether his appearance seemed more unusual in summer or winter is difficult to say. In the cold months, wearing black leather boots that came slightly more than halfway up his calves, a Russian black fur hat, a greatcoat that hung below his knees, and oversized fur mittens, he would walk out in any and all weather. He did so even in the most fierce of blizzards, when he would also put on dark goggles with small round lenses. In the drift-bound, below-zero weather that followed the storms, he could be seen moving through the unpopulated silence on snowshoes.

In summer, on the other hand, he was distinguished by being the only male in West Tree over six years of age to wear short pants. Sometimes these were authentic lederhosen, though most of the time they were belted, baggy, multi-pocketed gray shorts of soft thick cotton. In addition, he wore a pair of dusty oxfords and knee-high socks, an open shirt under a four-buttoned brown jacket (the latter omitted in hot weather), and on his head a Bavarian felt hat with the tail feather of a pheasant in it, set at a rakishly angle. In this season, he always carried with him a dark, knobbed, crooked walking stick.

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(He was wearing these clothes one unseasonably warm Saturday morning in April of 1954 when he came in at the front door, crossed the living room, passed the dining room piano, and came to a stop at my grandmother's elbow to look down at something she was reading. He stopped at her elbow at precisely the same moment that I, having been upstairs, where I hadn't heard him arrive, opened the staircase door and came into the dining room.

This coincidental timing placed me very close to him, and it was necessary for me to draw even closer as I stepped behind him (and my grandmother) in order to go into the kitchen. It was at just that moment, as I squeezed between him and the china cabinet, that I caught the scent that made its way out from among the folds and creases of his summer walking clothes, perhaps mainly from the brown jacket. It was a smell made up, as I've mentioned, mainly of the scent of mothballs and of very old woodsmoke, these mingled with three or four other traces, much fainter.

I know now that it was the scent of the past, of what had been but was no more, of what had existed and now did not. The scent brought to me, with an overwhelming immediacy and power, a flood of lost things from abandoned years like 1923, 1927, 1931, 1934, and 1938; the vanished remnants of days spent hiking, of backpacks, dust, trails, pine needles, forest floors, of streams and rods and reels and fish-knives and tents and creels and canvas and campfires—an impression so overwhelming to me that, as I left the dining room and went in through the kitchen door (Professor Kampfer, scarcely disturbed, gave me this time only a second's incurious glance before he turned back to my grandmother's reading material), I took with me for the first time in my life the sudden understanding that the past does exist but that the things in it do not; that the scent of old woodsmoke was the scent of something that was no longer there and that therefore could not exist and yet that at the same time still did exist; and that the mysteries of space and time must indeed be the puzzles that hold the answers to all things in the world and in the universe—and that yet, at the same time, remain, and show every promise that they will always remain, out of reach, impenetrable, and unknowable.

THE CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER FOUR

(In the spring of 1949, besides operating our farm, my father took a job, part time, substituting for another English instructor at Old College.

I was eight years old, and because 1949 was still one year before the Epoch of Walking was to begin ending in earnest, time still existed all around me: For a brief period longer, it would remain as omnipresent and nurturing as the air, and impossible for a person not to absorb.

Through this continued existence of time, certain aspects of richness in the world, and certain aspects of depth, continued for the time being to exist and to be a part of the normal experience of life. This richness, and this depth, were evident through the concomitant and continued existence everywhere of color, texture, mood, scent, implication, and feeling—through an entire wealth of qualities still resident in experience, although all too soon this wealth, also, would begin the irreversible process of disappearing forever.

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At the base of Old College Hill, Christiania Avenue abruptly lost its name and turned simply into a one-way road curving up the steep east slope of the hill. Often enough, I rode there with my father on errands up to Old College. As the ascent began, I could look out the left window and see a limestone retaining wall sliding by only feet from my eyes; or I could look out the right window at a sheer drop, where the road was held in place by another retaining wall, this one below road level. After we'd crested the hill and made a hundred-and-eighty degree turn, I could look out the back across a broad vista of prairie rolling westward. Then, a moment later, as the car moved under tall trees, I could look out from any window and see sidewalks, lawns, and buildings—some of red brick, some of limestone, one of wood—that made me think, as I always did, of the hilltop campus as being a small separate town in itself.

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(Late spring, a cloudless day, warm and still. It was finals week in the spring semester of 1949—near the end of the week, so that there were few students on the walkways or on the lawns reading, most having finished their exams and gone home.

My father had another errand to run—turning in his grades, meeting a student for a make-up exam, I don't know—that took him to First Hall. My sisters hadn't come along.

My mother and I stayed in the car outside First Hall as my father went up the stairs and in through the front door. The car was parked up fairly close to the west façade of the old building. My mother and I sat there looking at it, with its tall windows and high floors. If I put my head out and looked up, I could almost see the pointed bell tower and flagpole on the roof.

The windows were all open wide because of the day's warmth, and inside on the second floor you could see heads bowed forward as students worked on their exams. One of

them sat close enough to the window so that he could rest an arm on the sill with his hand out in the air. Between the fingers of that hand he held a lit cigarette.

My mother laughed quietly and clucked her tongue in a mock-stern way that told me that she and my father had done the same thing themselves when they had been students at Old College in the late 1920's and early 1930's. "Well, he's breaking the *rules*," my mother said, but in a school-yard way, making it into a song and holding the last word through two falling tones.

Perhaps the instructor looked up, or came back into the room just then, because the student dropped his cigarette, letting it fall from the second floor window. And in that moment, in the time it took for the cigarette to drop from window to the ground, I saw into the past. I may not have known it at the time, but I did see, through layer after layer after layer, down into the past itself.

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Things fit together and didn't fit together. In that brief moment, as the cigarette dropped through the sunlight, all time was one.

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I leaned forward with my elbows on the seat-back in front of me and looked at my mother. Her hair was still perfectly black, and she wore it pulled back tightly, almost severely, and shaped into a bun. She had on a flowered shirt with the sleeves rolled loosely, and over it a faded pair of farmer's denim overalls with straps over the shoulders. On her feet were ankle-high boots with garden mud caked on them.

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When my father went up the stairs and into First Hall, he'd had on wing-tip shoes, flannel slacks, a tie, light-blue shirt, and tweed jacket. At home, later that afternoon, he would have on a khaki shirt with the sleeves also rolled up, and khaki pants. He would have on boots like my mother's, but they would be caked not only with dried mud but also with manure from the barn.

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I was eight; my mother was forty-two. Seventeen years before, in this same month and season, she had graduated from Old College, a year after my father. And twenty-two years earlier than that, in 1910, my great-aunt Marie had come to West Tree to be a professor. Fifty-six years before that, in 1854, First Hall had been built—at a time when there were no buildings on the west side of town beyond a shanty or two, when Christiania Avenue was a wagon trail and the wading pool didn't exist, or the esplanade, or the hospital, or its solarium, or Marie and Lutie's house, or its upstairs bathroom, or its back yard, or its garden tools in the shed, or my grandmother's house with its skis and bicycle pump in the basement and the tennis rackets in the storage space upstairs and the telephone on its table in the hall.

And the same was true going in the other direction as well: things that were going to exist after 1949 hadn't come into being yet or been imagined. At that moment in May of 1949, in our car, with my mother, in front of First Hall, during the time it took the cigarette to fall from the second floor window to the ground, I hadn't yet come upon my father sitting naked on the front lawn, hadn't yet visited Marie and Lutie's upstairs bathroom, hadn't yet begun to fear death or fire, hadn't yet begun hiding in the linen closet to escape my fear of

death raining down from the skies, hadn’t yet seen Professor Kampfer’s cloud chamber, hadn’t walked in a straight line from the hospital to my grandmother’s house, hadn’t discovered unexpectedly the unifying function of my penis, hadn’t fallen in love with Marietta Streetfield, hadn’t taken her up the Nordic ski jump, hadn’t begun to receive even the very first of my perceptions that the world around me was diminishing inescapably into a phenomenon of absences rather than a phenomenon of presences, the first of my perceptions that history was coming to an end, that West Tree was beginning to disappear, that not even the forces of space and time, those forces that governed all things while remaining themselves impenetrable and ungovernable, would be sufficient to keep this last, terrible, and catastrophic thing—the annihilation from the face of the earth of life as I knew with absolute and fervid and uncompromising certainty it once had been—from occurring, from taking place, from happening.