Wistfulness

Nought Rael

I have forgotten which side of the path you walked on. For years I thought I remembered. Lately I have seen you on either side of me, and in each recollection the afternoon has seemed complete. There is grass against your skirt; there is the sound of our shoes on the loose stones. Then I try to hear you speak, and the words come without your voice. I begin again. You are on the other side of the path.

You used to wait by the low wall beyond the school. Sometimes you were late. I would decide that you were not coming, and begin to arrange my face for the discovery that I had misunderstood everything. Then you appeared, running a little, annoyed because someone had kept you. You would tell me what had happened before I could ask whether we were still walking together. Once you carried on past me while I was explaining why I had almost gone home. I had to catch up to finish explaining.

I remember how much you disliked being interrupted. You interrupted me constantly. There was a quarrel with your sister, a lesson you had not prepared, a tune whose ending you could never get right. You would stop halfway through an account of something and demand to know whether I was listening. I was listening to the whole of you, though I could not have said so without making us both uncomfortable. I told you what you had just said. You seemed satisfied and continued.

Beside you I sometimes forgot to be careful. A thought would reach my mouth before I had examined what might be done to me for saying it. You might disagree, or fail to hear, or laugh. I learned your laughter slowly. At first I waited for the part which would hurt. But you would still be looking at me, expecting me to go on. I had not lost my place in the conversation. There was more I could say.

At home I was loved. My mother knew when I had eaten too little; my father knew the look with which I said that nothing had happened. I have tried to tell what their love gave me. With you there was another astonishment. You had encountered me among the people who found me ridiculous, and had wanted to hear the end of something I was saying. It seemed to me that you had seen through the boy they made of me, and found someone there you could bear to walk beside.

I believed you were the only person who saw me as I was. I would not have known how to defend that belief. My parents knew things about me which you did not, and you sometimes misunderstood the simplest thing I said. Yet with you I could be quiet without becoming the quiet boy, awkward without having to spend the afternoon as an awkwardness. You grew impatient when I walked too slowly. We hurried. The matter was finished at the next corner.

You could whistle through your teeth. I could not. One afternoon you spent a long time trying to teach me, standing in front of me so that I had to look at your mouth. I was embarrassed and made no sound. You said I was not trying. I tried harder, and produced a noise which startled us both. You attempted to answer it and could not for laughing. I remember bending forward with my hands on my knees. A woman passing us asked what was so funny. We could not tell her.

For a little while there was nothing to tell. No account of what had been done to me, no need to persuade someone that I had been hurt. I could have stayed there until it grew dark. You remembered something you had been sent to buy and said we would be in trouble. We ran. That is part of the afternoon too: you had somewhere to go, and I went with you, still laughing, with the unpleasant taste in my mouth that came from trying to whistle.

When you told me you were moving away, you were sitting on the wall. You spoke about the new place, which you had not yet seen. There was something you hoped it would have. I cannot remember what. I remember thinking that you ought to stop speaking about it with

interest. Then you asked what was wrong, and I said nothing. You pulled at a blade of grass caught in the seam of your shoe. I watched your fingers and waited for you to ask again.

You did not ask again. I have returned to this so often that I can scarcely leave you alone beside that wall. In one recollection I tell you everything. In another you understand before I speak. But you were a girl who had been told she was moving, and I was a boy who had said that nothing was wrong. You could not hear all the things I had become accustomed to keeping out of my voice. I think of that blade of grass. I wish I could remember what you hoped to find in the new place.

We wrote for a while. Your letters contained people I did not know, names which returned often enough that I began to recognize them. I was glad you had someone to walk with. I was not altogether glad. There were fewer lines about the places we had known, and I read those lines first. Once you asked whether I had learned to whistle. I had forgotten you might remember that. I sat with the letter for a long time before reading the rest.

I cannot give the correspondence a last evening. The letters grew further apart. There were other things to write about, then things which required too much explaining. We had once been able to begin in the middle. Now I needed to tell you what had happened before I could tell you why it mattered, and somewhere in that distance the thing I wanted to say ceased to sound like anything. I do not know which of us wrote last. It is possible that we both waited.

Years afterward I saw a woman turn her head in the street and was certain, for a moment, that it was you. I followed her with my eyes until she turned back. She was speaking to someone beside her. Of course I had been expecting the face of a girl. I do not know your face now. I have given you years without being able to imagine what they have done, and I have kept waiting for you to appear unchanged in the midst of them.

What would I say if you did appear? I am afraid that I would begin with the importance you had for me, and that you would search your memory for an afternoon which had occupied only

an afternoon in yours. You might remember something I have lost. Perhaps I was thoughtless on a day which has become dear to me. Perhaps you too had gone home wanting to say something. I cannot enter those evenings. I have only our parting at the corner, and the confidence with which I once supposed that everything worth knowing about you had happened where I could see it.

Still I miss you. That small sentence survives everything I think to place beside it. I miss the impatience with which you called me when I fell behind. I miss not having to tell you why a place mattered, because you had been there. And I miss the boy who answered before fear had finished advising him. Sometimes he was happy, and you knew him when he was happy. There are days when I want to find you merely to ask whether you remember him.

I went past the wall recently. It is lower than I had kept it. I stood where I thought we must have stood, and tried to recall the tune you could not finish. Two children came along the path, disputing something with great seriousness. One stopped to look inside a torn bag. The other waited, still arguing. I moved out of their way. By the time they reached the corner, I could no longer distinguish what they were saying.

There was no reason to remain. I had seen the wall, the path, the corner where we parted. I began to walk, and after a little while I tried to whistle through my teeth. The sound came easily. I had learned years ago, without noticing when. I tried it once more. That was something I could have told you in a letter. I stood there trying to remember whether I ever had.