Dr. Anderton talked on and on about his painting. She threw in a question here and there, and that kept him going; he gesticulated and looked now at her, now at the picture. She began to relax a little and listened absent-mindedly, as she thought about the section in her essay that she wanted to discuss. Maybe he noticed that her attention had wandered, because he suddenly asked, “So – do you like it?” Laura started and met his eye instead of looking at the painting. She couldn’t help but be honest and answered, “Well, I don’t quite know. I don’t know what it means.”

His eyes narrowed and she bit the inside of her cheek until she felt a sudden taste of blood in her mouth – what an idiot she was! He laughed again and shrugged his shoulders: “I realize you are not so familiar with modern artistic expression. It can be a bit shocking, after Gainsborough and the gentlemen, I admit – but an artist must always forge ahead and not hesitate to challenge convention.” He smiled benevolently at her, but she knew that he knew that that wasn’t what she had meant. “Well! Time for the day’s work, then – let’s see what you’ve accomplished since last time.” He smiled again and walked toward the inner room and Laura followed silently.
He seemed to her more brilliant than ever this afternoon; he quickly read through what she had written and gave his opinions; crystal-clear and inspiring arguments, unexpected turns of thought and viewpoints – all that Dr. Anderton could be when he was at his best. Laura forgot everything personal and irrelevant when they embarked on a long and engaged discussion about the difference between landscape as idea and as representation. She grew warm and unbuttoned her coat; Dr. Anderton waved her papers in the air and raked his fingers through his dark hair that was now standing straight up. A feeling of fresh air and clear views; his arguments were solid as rock and she braced herself against them to climb higher in her own thoughts. They gestured, grew excited and interrupted each other, laughed a bit. When a church bell rang somewhere nearby both of them abruptly fell silent and looked at the window in confusion. Dr. Anderton straightened himself up and smoothed his hair, he pulled his watch out of his pocket and immediately grew heavy with authority again. Laura tucked her essay into her briefcase and closed it with a loud snap. She wanted to leave at once so that she could continue thinking about what they had discussed.

They stood up at the same time; once again she was struck by how tall he was. “So,” said Dr. Anderton, “our time is up, I’m afraid. After all, I have other students to take care of! Go ahead and work through that section thoroughly and we’ll meet again next week.” She nodded and buttoned her coat, he followed her out and continued talking. “Yes, I do believe your essay might become quite original, and certainly worth publishing. I’ll see what I can do. It is really too remarkable, a female student! And almost uneducated besides …” She didn’t know how to reply, or why he had that slightly cruel glint in his eye. He continued, “Please don’t misunderstand me, I adore women –
but still, one can’t deny that intellectually speaking, they rarely reach up to the male level. I don’t know what the reason is, but it is like an innate weakness – perhaps it is because most of them would rather raise a family than do intellectual work. After all, that lies in woman’s nature.”

Laura raised her chin and looked him in the eye. “And you? Don’t you have a family?” She regretted her words as soon as she said them, because he looked so triumphant. It was of course an almost shamelessly personal question, but that didn’t seem to bother him. He brushed the hair off his forehead and said calmly, “No, and I have never had any desire for that sort of thing either. Of course a man can have a family without allowing himself to be completely consumed by it, but I still think that men with family responsibilities usually lose some of their sharpness. Not to the same degree that a woman does, naturally - but still. No, work is and will remain the central thing for me.” He looked at her proudly and arrogantly but she met his eyes without hesitating. “It is for me too,” she answered. They stared at each other for a few endless seconds, then Laura opened the door and left without saying goodbye.

(198-9)

They had already talked for over an hour. Laura had no watch but she felt it in her bones: their time was up. But Dr. Anderton didn’t seem concerned about it – perhaps he had no other students today? She fingered at her papers but decided to stay a few minutes longer. The sun, which shone today in a clear blue sky, reached partly into the room and transformed it. Out in the studio a window stood ajar, and Laura could clearly sense the smell of springtime in the breeze that wafted all the way into the room.
where they sat. She stretched out her legs under the table and wiggled her feet a bit.

Dr. Anderton was talking about an exhibition that she hadn’t seen yet; she listened but didn’t say much. He sat with his back to the window and the sunlight gave him soft and glowing contours. She squinted toward him and for a moment he looked a bit bewildered; he interrupted himself and turned halfway to the window. “On a day like this one should be out in the country,” he said. “Yes,” said Laura, “This time of year I always long for the beech woods back home, the first thin little leaves and the light on those silvery trunks.” She fell silent when he turned toward her again. “Where are you from, anyway?” he asked, “Surely you’re not from London, are you?” “No, from Wiltshire.” He nodded but didn’t ask anything else. Instead he said, “When I was a boy we used to go and visit my aunt in Torquay this time of year. I’m reminded of it every year - the light of the sea, and the gulls and the palm trees, all the boats in the harbor …” Something soft and foreign crept into his features and Laura looked away; she didn’t want to see it. She thought that she should be leaving, but instead she heard herself say, “Father and I always went to the beech woods, he had his easel with him and I would lie in the grass reading. I always used to see the first bumblebee there.” She looked up in astonishment and met Dr. Anderton’s gaze. He smiled and said carefully: “So your father was a painter. A landscape painter, perhaps?”

Laura grasped her papers and shuffled them into an even pile. She laughed nervously and said, “He painted that clearing in the beech woods almost every year.” She bent down and put her papers into the briefcase that stood on the floor next to her chair. It was so warm in the room; she hesitated over the briefcase and then her gaze fell on Dr. Anderton’s black, polished shoes. He had crossed one leg over the other and his
left foot swung gently back and forth, moving slowly and softly; the movement reminded her of the way a cat moves the very tip of its tail when the rest of its body is completely still. She took a breath and straightened up. He was still watching her.

“I really must go now,” said Laura. She got up and clutched the briefcase to her breast; he remained sitting for a moment with his face raised toward her. The room seemed to pitch before her eyes and the skin on her face stung and felt tight. Then he stood up and followed her out through the studio, where the air felt fresh and liberating.

When he opened the door for her he said, still with that careful, mild voice: “I gather that your father meant very much to you; he must have taught you a great deal.” She looked up at him gratefully. “He taught me everything I know.” She hesitated and then added, “Perhaps he wasn’t a great painter, but he had true devotion.” “Devotion …” said Dr. Anderton. “Yes, I suppose in the end nothing else really matters.” Now he was the one who avoided her gaze. She mumbled her goodbye and went down the stairs; only after she had turned at the first landing did she hear the door close above her. When she opened the front door the sunshine rose like air against her face and the din of the street seemed overwhelming. She suddenly felt very frightened.

Laura is walking along a street under an umbrella in the cold spring rain. She has forgotten her gloves, and her fingers are red and stiff as they hold the umbrella handle; her boots are soaked and wetness seeps in through the seams. Yes, she is cold but that makes no difference. She is carrying a package of meat, wrapped in a double layer of brown paper, holds it pressed to her side under the umbrella to protect it from the rain. A
soft and compact weight against her ribs; she hopes that the juice won’t seep through the paper and stain her coat. She walks briskly and thinks about the fire she will light and about the meat and about whether Tilda will be home – and then she suddenly stops, so abruptly that all at once she hears the drumming of the rain against the umbrella and her own breath and she realizes with surprise that she has already known it for a long time: she is going to have a love affair with Ian Anderton.

(207-8, from Laura’s journal)

Today at A.’s place, my consternation: He understands what I am saying, what it is I am looking for. We share something that I cannot share with anyone else; and yet I can never trust him. When I was about to leave he stood so close to me for a moment that I felt the heat of his body: the smell of pipe tobacco. I have such a remarkable feeling of being seen, even when I am completely alone. Everything that I see becomes deeper and filled with meaning after our meetings, but it frightens me that I can’t protect my solitary space from him. Nothing but fantasies. It is impossible, I must understand that. Must never give in to that longing: that would be the end.

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I have begun to sleep in a strange way. It is as if I simply fall deep down into another world, which is a trance, which is a dream but without the images and stories of dreams. It is as if it were a dream of the body rather than of the soul or the consciousness. And I wake up in a daze but secretly satisfied, because I know that I have been with him.

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Tilda has now decided to move out. As soon as she said it I realized that I was lost. I will no longer be able to be one of them. As if I somehow had been trying for Tilda’s sake? I feel that something is growing hard and taut inside me. Sometimes I think that there is a wolf in my heart: shaggy and ugly and hungry and ruthless. I think that is what Tom sometimes sees in my eyes and it frightens him. He wants to tame it with tenderness and caresses. But a wolf can never become a dog. I work like a maniac. It feels like a returning: autumn air, solitude.

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Today in the studio: such a simple, innocent gesture and yet it changed everything … No, I can’t write about it. But now I know what will happen and it is unavoidable. We are the same kind, he and I: it is a fire that kills.

I thought about what I call my landscapes again, that hard, clear light over the fields. Openness, the sweep of bird wings across the sky. Must try to preserve this, whatever happens now. It feels like the most important thing of all and it takes all my strength.

I have broken off with Tom now, for good. It was awful. He is crushed and no one understands anything. I won’t say anything even to Tilda. I must bear this alone.

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Have I lost my wings now and fallen to earth?

(212-215)

She always kissed him before she left; fully dressed, she bent over him as he lay there with his nakedness only partially covered by the wrinkled sheet. She leaned down
into his warmth for a final kiss and squeezed the gloves in her hand. He was always so ardent then, looked her right in the eyes and answered her kiss with a satiated languor. “Must you go already?” he murmured as she pulled on her gloves. She never looked back during the short walk through the room to the door.

That room within the studio – she could have drawn it in her sleep, every single object, every detail. The big writing desk by the window, overflowing with books, papers, colorful prints and pictures. The bookshelves along the walls, the marble letter press that lay on the windowsill, the tea trolley with its flowers of inlaid wood, filled with bottles, glasses, cups and opened packages of biscuits. The chairs and the round table in front of the stove where the gas light burned, the lamp with its pleated green shade. And then the ottoman, which was always made up with clean sheets when she came, the coverlet folded back in one corner. One time she thought: He can’t even give me that, the simple joy of lying down on sheets that already contain our scents like a feeling of belonging. Always clean sheets; always new every time; that’s how it felt. After all it was his workroom, everything in it arranged just for him. At the beginning of their relationship, when she still had harbored a secret hope, she had given him a Chinese vase that she had found in an antique shop. She had dreamed that her femininity would begin to enter his room and put its mark on it; she wanted to take flowers with her and see them in the Chinese vase; wanted his friends and students to notice the gift of love and think: he has a woman. But the next time she came, the vase was gone and she never saw it again. And her hope very soon changed into the raging pain that she now associated with this room. She was a guest there, always only a visitor - always clean sheets.
She kissed him and left. She never saw him as clearly as when she was leaving him, and she knew that that was how it was for him too and that was why she had to leave. His large, heavy body, usually so full of restless energy, now lay satisfied and relaxed on the ottoman; one arm under his neck, the other lazily stretched out over the sheet. His chest was covered with black, curly hair where the sweat was now beginning to dry. Beard stubble had begun to show on his cheeks and chin; his big mouth was half open and a little damp. His sex rested heavy and warm against his groin; one hairy thigh was drawn up a little, the other stretched out. She always looked at his feet first; he had beautiful feet and was proud of them. Long and strong, with high arches; they resembled his hands. He lay with eyes closed and she knew that it was his gift to her; he rested within himself and let her see him. Then he opened his eyes, and she kissed him and left.

As luck would have it the streets of the city stretched out, separating their rooms. Laura always chose the quiet and empty back streets, where solitary lamps stood in between dusty trees, and cats slunk among the trashcans. She walked very quickly, the surge of desire still a memory in her body. She could feel so clear-headed then, could think calmly: I know that he will leave me and that it will hurt me to death. In order to keep him yet a while I must hide this knowledge. As soon as he sees my fear he will abandon me; as soon as he senses the full power of my devotion he will conquer me. Love is a journey between two rooms, with a mute, empty street in between.

Laura had known all along that their love bore the seeds of betrayal within it like a bitter fruit that would slowly ripen and then fall, but that changed nothing for her. And even though she often felt so utterly defenseless against the pain that their love gave her, she also sensed a remarkable strength growing inside her. During her nightly walks
through the city, Laura more and more often felt that she was not alone. She began to sense that she was part of an ancient, sorrowful community, that she was one of an endless row of women who love and who know that their full devotion must be concealed and their pain borne in solitude. This experience was oddly comforting.

In cities everywhere women get up from men’s beds, smile and pull on their gloves. In cities everywhere women leave warm rooms and go out on the abandoned streets, and they move as carefully as they can so that the heavy fruit of betrayal will not fall all at once. And it always does fall, at last, and then maybe the woman who has walked through the streets actually feels a great relief. She no longer has to wait for the dreaded moment; she doesn’t need to carry her silent cry through nocturnal streets. She is at home in her solitude, as she always has been.

One evening when Laura came home something had changed. It had rained, the streets were shining and drops fell from the foliage of the trees; she was wet and cold and the tears tasted like earth on her face. It was in the fifth year of their love affair, the dark autumn of 1927. She sat on the floor of the entrance hall, hugging her body with her arms, and all at once she felt it: the fruit had fallen now. And in its fall it had been transformed, all the bitter fear was gone and all that remained was a boundless strength and a love that could never die. The fruit had fallen. Fallen into her and laid itself to rest. A warm little weight that rested at the bottom of the curved bowl of her pelvis, a pulsating darkness that collected all her tears and all her fear and transformed them.

She sat there for a long time that evening, on her own hall floor, with her hands cupped in awe around her belly. Something foreign had settled into her, begun to grow and live; she knew that that movement finally would take her away from Ian. Yet that
moment on the hall floor was one of Laura’s happiest moments. She kept her hands on her belly, closed her eyes and felt